

玩具堂

イラスト／bun150

ガイド・
ブック
ザ・ガイド

ゼロから
育てる
電腦少女

七

1

角川スニーカー文庫

Novel Illustrations

1





KODUCHI FUYU

YUU'S CHILDHOOD FRIEND.
SHE HAS SPICY TONGUE
DESPITE BEING SMALL,
BUT SHE ACTUALLY HAS
FEELING FOR YUU!



"W-WAIT,
HARUHA!"

KUGIMIYA MIHARU
THE PERSON INSIDE MIFU.
EVEN THOUGH SHE'S BRO
DEALING WITH GUYS, SHE'S
LIVING TOGETHER WITH YUUJI?

KASUGAI YUU
THE PERSON INSIDE CLAMP.
HE'S RAISING HARUHA
TOGETHER WITH MIHARU.

"MOMMY'S
BREASTS ARE
BIGGER THAN
USUAL (IN GAME)!"

HARUHA
CLAMP AND MIFU'S
DAUGHTER. SHE
CAME FROM THE
GAME WORLD TO
REAL! WORLD!

REAL LIFE

CtG



Kasugai Yuu



Clamp

16 years old high school student. His mother is the creator of "CtG", but for some reasons he now lives all alone. In CtG he's called "Clamp of Scarabaeus".



Kugimiya Miharuru



Mifa

A high school girl. She's living together with Yuu whom she met the first time. Even though she's bad with guys, in CtG she has a strong personality. Her breast is big in both game and real life.



Haruha



Haruha

Clamp and Mifa's daughter who was born in "CtG". She shows up in real life!?



Koduchi Fuyu

Bio: Yuu's childhood friend. The one who often call Yuu, who's a loner, "Yuubocchi" (combination of Yuu and Bocchi = Loner), but actually have a feeling for him.

Niino Mansei

Bio: A mysterious man who's involved to the birth of Haruha. He won't take off his glasses even when inside a room.



Hajime Hidari

Bio: Second mysterious person who's involved with the birth of Haruha. A charming older woman who occasionally taking care of Yuu.



Characters Introduction

Real
Life
Real
Life

Niino
A
Mansai
mysterious
Niino
man who's
Mansai
mysterious
with who's
Haruha's
birth. He
won't take
off his
glasses
even when
inside a
room when
inside a
room.

Kodzuchi
Yuu's
childhood
friends
She
often calls
Yuu, who's
often calls
"Yubocchi",
but actually
has
feelings for Hajime
Second
him.
mysterious
person and
involved
with
Haruha's
birth. A
charming
older. A
womaning
who often
takes care
of Yuu.
takes care
of Yuu.

Kasugai
16 year old
Yuu
high school
Kasugai
student in his
Yuu
higher is the
creator. His
of "100" state
Kugimiyu
died high
Miharu
simultaneous
Kugimiyu
leaves
Miharu
and Hajime's
relationship
with the
Haruha
Miharu's
"Gothic Lolita".
Haruha
Miharu's
"Gothic Lolita".
With guys,
with the
with guys,
strong
personality.
the
work
with the
gothic
and in real
life
and in real
life.

*The glass rings with sweet power,
It darkens, clears: it must have being!
In a delicate form I see appear
A well-behaved little Man behaving.
What can the world ask more, what can
we?
Now that this mystery's visible to each.
Give ear to what this sounds may be,
They make a voice: they're forming
speech.*

-『Faust』 by Albert G.Latham-

The moon quickly darkened as if it was being wrapped by the shadow.

He took a step back in reflex.

A step back. One, two---

As he took his third step, the shadowy figure descended along with a roar.

An Attack.

Although he managed to keep his balance, the earth shook as the mysterious figure landed on the ground, forcing him to retreat even further.

He clicked his tongue in disappointment at himself and turned his gaze towards the opponent in front of him.

----With help from the faint light of the moon, the great bird that was five meters away looked down on crawling prey. Something on the centerpiece of its head was shining vigorously as it watched over from above, it was an eyeball.

It looked grotesque.

If you ignored the size of its eyeball it would be just like a normal bird, and down from its wrist was coated by an armor-like shell. With that, any attack that was aimed at its legs would most likely be repelled.

『The Sky Debris Megalon Evis』

It was tonight's target.

If you walked in small numbers in the eastern grassland, it would come and attack--- Up until there, everything has gone according to the information they got.

The boy gasped nervously and unsheathed his sword, 《Scramasax》^[1].

Then just as planned---

“Wait, will it be okay!?”

Just as he was about to take a step forward, a voice called over to him. It belonged to his comrade who was hiding within the nearby bushes.

The avoidance from earlier was indeed a close one. It was gratifying that she was worried, but...

“Idiot! Don’t be so loud!”

There was no other choice but to shout back. Sure enough, the great bird had already reacted to the voice of his comrade and kicked the ground.

Although it didn't fly, it jumped as if it was flying.

Swiftly.

Big, at any rate it was indeed big.

With power appropriate to its big size, it cut off dozens of meters in an instant and came close to its new-found target.

“Uhyaaa!?”

Along with a restless scream, the girl hurriedly jumped out from the bushes.

As if embracing her fluttering blonde hair, she rolled and fell onto the ground.

Aiming at the girl, the great bird swung up its claw.

Although the girl managed to stand up, she had completely lost her chance to escape. In that moment, the claw reflected a sparkling image of her quivering pupils, The girl was hit and blown by the impact and once again tumbled onto the grass.

The boy who was armed with a sword managed to follow up in time. However, by doing so he was exposed to the claw of the great bird. The boy who charged in to save his comrade should have had no way to escape.

With the rough noise of the wind being sliced, the pole-like claw swung down. The girl couldn't help but to shut her eyes.

From the looks of it, the boy who was wearing light armor shouldn't have been able to handle the attack from the giant bird and would have been expelled from this world.

---But even when the impact hit the ground, the boy's presence (Marker) did not disappear.

When the girl timidly opened her eyes, the boy had managed to retreat creating 5 to 6 meters in an instant. It was truly an unbelievable feat.

Unsurprisingly, the boy raised a sharp cry.

“Get down!”

The great bird's feet were blown with a flash.

From its large sound, bugs that were resting upon its wings flew off in unison.

As the boy avoided its claw, he detonated the bombs he had prepared earlier.

The staggered bird then spread its wing. If hit by a large-type weapon it would spread its wings— everything was according to the information they got.

In an instant, a rain of arrows started showering towards its wing. Without the need to confirm, it was from the comrades who were hiding within the forest.

As the damage accumulated, the great bird lowered its back. Furthermore, the damage on its wings would temporarily disable its flying ability.

“I’m counting on you.”

“Y-yes!”

Led by the boy’s voice, the girl from before stabilized her breathing and closed her eyes in a hurry. Then quietly, the sound of a voice soaked through the night along with the wind. It was a cursed song to negate the giant bird-type monster’s 《Voice Curse》. Megalon Evis’s Death Throes Scream was an AOE attack that would cause instant death.

The wild singing voice lightly echoed through the hunter’s meadow. The girl’s hair shone faintly and she timidly opened her eyes to check whatever the song came into effect or not.

The boy’s body emitted light as he approached the enemy that was now lying on the ground. The drawn sword was then swung under the moonlight.

“---Got you!!”

The great bird’s eye was taken down in one swing.

CRITICAL HIT!!

The blood sprayed up into the air like the trace of a sonorous singing voice. The shreds of blood then formed a few clear words above the air and the moon changed color to crimson red as if it was stained by it.

Prologue

『Cradle to the Glaive』, otherwise commonly known as 『CtG』, was in general a very realistic online role playing game. Set in a virtual world that was played by a large number of players.

The place where the boy and his comrades fought the great bird Megalon Evis was called the “Dragons’ Glaive”. It was one of 10 world spheres that consisted within 『CtG』, and as a RPG, 『CtG』 was a very standard “World of Magic and Sword”.

The moon in Dragon’s Glaive changes color each night.

The moon that day was blue. If one looked at the vast grassland they could see an eye-catching sight of transparent butterflies casually flying by. And in midst of such peacefulness...

“Are you a dung beetle?”

It was when the boy had sat down on a big rock and opened up the menu screen that he got called that. The game menu that was displayed on the air hardly had any differences when compared from traditional role playing games.

The boy then closed the menu by switching his gaze. There was no need to search for the owner of the voice. The face of a girl appeared in front of him. It was the girl who got blown off from earlier. The girl then kneeled down to look at the boy's face.

The boy was unconsciously (been) taken aback and was hit by the rock beside his head. Even though the pain was reduced while in game, the shock from it had shaken his vision — and within this vision, the girl appeared to be laughing.

They were discussing about the distribution of the quest reward from before, and what made it surprising was that the girl turned out to be quite pretty. She

was like some kind of idol wearing a stage costume, and so fluffy dresses seemed to suit her well.

Even though she fell on the ground twice, her clothes hardly had any traces of soil or dirt on it. Ultimately(,)because this was contained within a game, what was in front of them was just an illusion perceived through electronic signals shown to the brain.

But that was not important right now.

The boy then stood up, cleared his throat and asked the girl.

“Do I look like a bug to you?”

“But doesn’t your second name tag say 《Clamp of Scarabaeus》 on it?”

The boy then switched to expansion mode to look at it. Indeed, there was a string attached to a floating placard saying 《Clamp of Scarabaeus》 around his shoulder. It was a yellow tag that was attached by other players. The boy—Clamp, let out a small sigh.

“Please don’t give it any attention. It was just a thing those people gave me without permission....it’s something like a nickname.”

He was referring to those people that had given them assistance through bows and arrows from before. 【Labyrinth Troupe】 is a small but long-established guild. Clamp was not a member but he often went together with them to finish quests. The girl in front of him seemed to be a guest too, just like him, but it was the first time he had ever met her.

“Is that so?” replied the girl.

“When I look up the dictionary service, a scarab turned out to be a kind of dung beetle. Quite a weird nickname, I say.

Aaa, do you know? There’s no dung beetle in Japan. Surprising, isn’t it?. It’s a famous insect. I’d have expected it to be somewhere in place such as nearby park.”

And naturally the conversation continued. But it was too fast-paced and really abrupt. Clamp was someone who was bad with conversations and couldn't help but to be confused in this situation, however it did not leave a bad impression on the girl.

“Hmm.... I see.”

“Ah, you don't have to be polite. It doesn't seem we are that far off in terms of age.”

Just like what the girl had said, Clamp and the girl did not seem to have that wide a gap in age.

That meant that the ages of both players were close to each other.

In 『CtG』, players control their in-game avatar through their brain's nerves system. Therefore, the player's gender, physique, and physical age couldn't be that far from their real self, otherwise they wouldn't be able to operate it.

Of course, there were cases of kids making themselves look grown up or adults intentionally making themselves look young... Well, such news were spreading through the internet, and Clamp could only nod and sigh.

The girl's smile in response was charming to say the least, and went without saying that it was truly powerful and bore its own weight. There's no sane man who would go against that smile.

“My name is Mifa. Thank you for saving me earlier. I forgot to say thanks so I came here. I've only played 『CtG』 for a month, so I'm still a beginner. I hope we get well together, Scarabaeus-kun”



Along with a powerful smile, the girl, Mifa held out her hand.

Clamp somehow felt defeated. He couldn't win. That's why(,) rather than shaking her hand as he should have, he took her hand as if giving up.

“Aaa, my regards Mifa. But that name is a bit...”

In that moment, above their connected hands, a pair of arcs appeared.

The semicircular arcs of light didn't feel realistic at all. Both were flashing a red and blue color, resembling butterflies playing with each other.

“.....What is this?”

Muttered Mifa absentmindedly. Clamp was a little bit more composed. Or maybe he was just simply too surprised to react properly.

“This is an event...”

He had heard about this before. This was a special event that only occurred when certain conditions were met between two players. When semicircular arcs of red and blue lights are displayed it means —

“This is the signal for 『《Marriage》 Available』!!”

“Haaa...?” Shouted Mifa loudly.

“What the heck is that? We've only met today right?”

“I don't know... but the requirements for this event is for 『Both players' personality, aptitude, behavior logs to perfectly fit with each other and their compatibility level has to be at its maximum』... That's what was written on the official guide. It can only occur when the personality data of both are perfectly matched, and since the compatibility data's are completely unknown, there are only very few pairs who have received this event. They number less than two digits within over one hundred fifty ten thousand players in this game.

This is truly THE ULTRA RARE! A mystical event!”

“Y-you sure know a lot...”

Noticing that Mifa pulled back after hearing his overly passionate talk, Clamp quickly averted his eyes.

“...Well, there’s a reason for it actually. Because I’ve decided to 『Experience every Event』 in this game as a goal.”

Hearing that, Mifa’s eyes widened.

“To experience everything... are you serious? But I've heard that there are over 3000 events in the 10 spheres? And they are steadily increasing.”

“I don’t mind if it’s increasing. However, though I understand that it will be difficult, no matter how much time it will take, this year I’ll clear every released event... I must do it, or it’ll be no good.”

“Hmm...”

While being illuminated by red and blue lights, Mifa let out her voice as if being impressed. And while reflecting the lights, she directed her gaze at Clamp.

“Best compatibility.... huh.”

After rubbing her dazzling small lips with her finger, she said,

“Then... should we try it out?”

It was so sudden that Clamp blinked in panic.

“《Marriage》, I meant! If we let this go now, I wonder when it would appear again?”

“But... is it okay with such light feelings...”

“But, well...”

Mifa, who was unsure what to say, suddenly burst out laughing lightheartedly.

“This is just inside a game after all.”

If you think about it, it was exactly like she said.

After that, both of them checked the online manual just in case 《Marriage》 had some kind of demerit, but from what they had read(,) there was none.

Both of them closed their online manual screen and stared at each other.

“W-well then... let’s... do it”

Clamp proposed quite frivolously .

“Yeah, since we have gone this far.”

Replied Mifa plainly as they proceeded.

Both of them then held hands below the flying arcs of light. As they did that, the arcs stopped moving and slowly descended while approaching their hands, forming a circle. Then, it started circling both of their hands.

CLING

It made a metallic sound as if turning a lock.

And so, their wedding was completed as simply as heating up a cup of ramen.



—Just a few seconds after the 《Marriage》, the boy returned from the illusionary grassland to reality.

And soon after that, “Emm... Then, dismiss?” said both of them fuzzily as a form of farewell and logged out from the game. It was not like some kind of chain event(s), and tomorrow both of them would head to their own schools and lead their ordinary lives.

They were barely conscious about their wedding in a virtual world event, and it just passed as if nothing happened. It was truly an unfulfilling experience.

Immediately after logging out, he felt an uncomfortable sensation as if his body and mind was out of sync.

『CtG』 worked very similarly to real life and the operational mechanism barely had any differences (to it) . When controlling the body with low precision, it would feel very unreliable and naturally hard to control.

Kasugai Yuu, who was still trying to shake off the sensation of being “Clamp”, took off the transparent visor on his head. That visor was called the Râmîêl^[2] and was the exclusive wearable gear for 『CtG』 used to dive into the game.

What was seen after taking off the Ramiel was a dark living room. No one was there. It was completely dark, and only the traces of faint lights could be seen throughout the house.

In the middle of the room was a needlessly big sofa. That was his recent comfortable spot. He used this TV watching-exclusive spot to connect to 『CtG』, and it was the most comfortable place to wake up on.

Within the faint darkness, *tick tock*. The sound of an analog clock that hung on the wall filled the quietness of the room. Yuu looked at the clock, and both of its needles pointed at 12. Those needles might have been the only animated object in the room...

—And suddenly he felt a chill run down his spine.

Along with that sensation, he could feel the movement of his own blood pulse. As if some kind of otherworldly being had returned to this world.

“....I’m alive”

He unconsciously talked to himself as he reached out his hand to grab the mineral water on the table. Then a smile from a photo displayed on a frame on the table caught his eyes. As if being taken over, Yuu opened his mouth and said—

“Mom.... I married (with) someone in a game”

Kasugai Yuu, he is a boy who turned sixteen today. It has been half a year since his mother passed away. And from that day on, he had been living all alone in this large house—

At...

least...

supposed...

to...



“DAAaaaaaaaaddy~~~”

BAM

Alongside a ruthless cry, Kasugai Yuu got pushed onto his “special seat” above the sofa by a little kid who jumped at him like a cannonball.

“Welcome home!!”

That kid was a girl. Her appearance was that of a little girl at the age of eight years old. She was very adorable and cute.

Her dazzling smile was so bright that it could illuminate the entire living room.

“Oi....”

Yuu suddenly let out a strict voice towards the girl, but that was not because he got hurt from what she did.

“It’s not good you know. Look, you’re drenching wet.”

The girl's body was dripping hot water and she must have taken a bath after being drenched by the heavy rain outside.

Her long hair that was usually soft and fluffy was now sticking on her shoulder and back.

Yuu held both of the girl's hands and pulled her to stand in front of the sofa.

After clearing his throat, he looked straight into the girl's eyes.

“Remember to wipe yourself immediately after coming out of the bath. Even though it's summer, you will catch a cold like that.”

“Eeeee—....?”

The girl who came out from the dressing room, only wearing a piece of panties showed no effort of covering herself at all.

“But, but, if I wipe myself, Rasupu-chan will begin!”

How will you take responsibility for making me miss it? Said the girl through her eyes, and in response, Yuu looked at the clock hanging on the wall. It was almost seven p.m. That was the time for the anime 『Revive! Mystical Priest Girl Rasupu-chan 5』 that was popular amongst girls.

“But you can watch it anytime, right?”

TV shows these days could be recorded immediately after the broadcast, so it could be viewed anytime.

But the girl only puffed her cheeks upon hearing that.

“No! It must be watched at the right time!”

“But there will be CM^[3] running midway.”

“But I won't able to cheer if I don't watch it at the right time—!”

“O-Oh, is... that so.”

Somehow within her head watching at the broadcast time = live air. Breaking a child's innocence was not an option so he could only give up. It was then that a voice coming from the bathroom could be heard.

"I'll wipe her up, please bring the towel here."

"No, no way! What are you saying!?"

What came turned out to be a panicked voice then followed by the sound of hurried footsteps.

"I'll wipe her! Kasugai-kun, can just stay still there."

"Well if so then I will leave it to.... YOU!?"

The one who appeared was—— a girl with an amazing look holding a towel, coming out from the bathroom.

Even though she was a girl, she was definitely not a little girl, absolutely not.

"Aaa... look, the carpet is all wet..."

Just like Yuu, she was sixteen years old. A pale steam from the bath could be seen above her semi-long hair as she wiped it with a towel. She was dressed very lightly with a simple shirt and knee-length pants. The girl then went on both knees and gently brushed the little girl's hair.

That was not important, really. She appeared to be in a hurry and had forgotten to wipe herself properly, and as a result her shirt was sticking to her body and her skin was visible.

From where Yuu was, he could only see her back, but the nape of her neck and her shoulder let out a nice fragrance. As a boy of his age, seeing that wonderful sight was a pleasant experience. If he bent his body a little he might be able to see more of it.

"There, raise your hand and do a banzai. Say banzai!"

"Uuu, I won't be able to watch Rasupu-chan"

And while they were doing that— by the time they knew it, the anime opening theme song (1 minute 30 seconds) had nearly ended— and Yuu only noticed that after he finished watching the scene of a girl wiping the body of a little girl.

After collecting himself, Yuu opened his mouth.

“W-Well, Kugimiya-san...”

“Nn? What is it?”

The girl— Kugimiya Miharu replied without averting her attention from wiping the body of the child.

Even though he was haunted with bad feeling, he had no choice but to say it.

“Kugimiya-san too... I mean... I suggest you to wipe yourself too, I think...”

“Ee?”

Cliiiiink.... somehow the sound of Miharu’s neck turning can be heard.

While staying where she was, Miharu looked down at her awkward appearance, then turned around. Her face remained expressionless but she was clearly trembling.

“Why... are you still here?”

Didn’t you tell me to stay still? Was the answer that floated above his head.

While desperately averting his eyes, he replied with fast tongue.

“I get it, but Kugimiya-san, you should hurry up and take off your clothes or you will get cold. You came here in that outfit in a hurry right? I won’t think of anything that would break your heart or violate your body, but I cannot avoid this situation, as I’m trying to explain this is, you know.... An accident.”

Without any warning, Miharu took the towel on her hand and *Slam* wrapped Yuu’s head with it to cover up his vision. The wet towel did not cause much pain though.

“If it’s an accident then please don’t look even further. Go out!”

Although it was clearly an unreasonable request, when he peeked through the towel, he saw Miharū’s eyes trembling as it let out tears. There was no way he could protest against that.

Okay okay... He said while leaving the living room after accepting the compromise.

“Wait.”

But he was stopped by Miharū.

When he fearfully turned around, the settled voice appeared to be coming out from the head that was hiding behind the sofa.

“Well, Kasugai-kun. That was, I mean.... I was wrong. I’m sorry. Let’s be careful and don’t repeat it again”

And then while watching their “daughter” whose eyes were glued to the TV screen, she continued.

“I’m her mother and Kasugai-kun is her father. But, you and I are.... not like that, not at all”

“.....I know.”

They had been repeating this conversation over and over, he knew that.

He understood, but...

The current situation they were in was hard to explain, what Miharū wanted to say was that it lied in the nature of the problem.

While deeply thinking about that, Yūu finally left the living room to the hallway.

It was just a week ago that this place was still filled with nothing but darkness. But now,

“Eh? Mom, where is dad? Let’s watch this with all of us together”

“We will call him after I have calmed down.”

From the living room he had just left, the voice of a mother and her daughter can be heard.

They were probably the strangest pair of mother and daughter in the world. That girl is definitely her daughter. But that mother... is pretty much a stranger.

That's right.

Everything began from the night of that spring. Two months ago, ever since his unbelievably reckless 《Marriage》 with Mifa in 『Cradle to the Glaive』...

“My life... became bugged.

Chapter 1: Input

“Then, see you tomorrow”

Homeroom came to an end as the teacher left the class with a refreshing smile, then the class, 1-C , started to get noisy.

Kasugai Yuu took no attention to any of the topics the others were talking about and stood up while holding his bag.

He didn't particularly stand out or anything. He wore his uniform normally, though the color of his undershirt did violate the school rules it was still okay, at any rate he was just a normal obscure sixteen year old boy.

After the sunset outside met his eyes— which was certainly beautiful— he went ahead to the exit.

“Ooi, Yuu!”

The one who called him was a boy who stood out more than him. His hair had a light brown color and was also pretty tall. While only facing his face Yuu replied,

“What is it Kouta?”

Yuu responded to his friend. Itono Kouta. They've been friends since elementary school. Although their appearances were alike he was more of a spirited guy that goes well with innocent and pure people.

“It's been awhile, do you want to go to the arcade? Do you remember that person from middle school you beat up in a fighting game? She said she wanted to face you again for revenge”

From the looks of it, there were two guys from the class waiting for Kouta.

They often chatted together with both of them during break time, but...

“...Sorry. I'm not really in the mood”

“I see. Well, can't be helped”

Kouta easily nodded and left the classroom along with the other two.

“Then see you later”

The smile Kouta left as he departed made Yuu's heart ache. As a friend since middle school, he understood Yuu's “circumstances”. To be taken care by a friend, so pathetic.

Even so, he just didn't feel like having any foolish commotion with them. And while pitying his boring self, this time he finally went off to leave the classroom— but was once again stopped by an acquaintance.

“Fuyufu...”

“If you isolate yourself too much, your relationship with others will worsen”

Kudzuchi Fuyufu.

She was a girl who would perfectly fit wearing a S-size uniform, a small-sized petite girl. She was even shorter than Yuu who was shorter compared to an average guys' height. Yuu looked down on her head that seemed like a doll wrapped with sleek black hair.

But in contrast to her small physic, her facial expression was that of a grown-up. And despite having a pretty cute face, she's giving off atmosphere that hard to get close in.

“People call that 『Loner』”

And this part of her who loves to say things too much must also be noted.

“What up with that suddenly?”

“Nothing”

As she said that, the light in her eyes showed the cold color of condemn.

“It's been a month since we entered high school. And in this crucial time, I couldn't help seeing the kid from the neighborhood I used to play with losing even more friends than he already is, so I came here to warn you about it. I'm so kind right?”

There were some parts he couldn't let go but he understood it. He wasn't mad from what she said— since it was the truth— but the word “kid from the neighborhood” caught his attention.

Just how long do want to pull back our relationship from elementary school? He would retort.

“And what about you, do you have any friends?”

In response Fuyufu let out a casual yawn, reminiscent that of a cat.

“On the weekends we're planning to go window shopping, eat sweets in the café, and taking flirty and sparkly pictures in photo booth, the three of us in total. Unfortunately they're all girls”

...It was frustrating, but it didn't sound like a lie. Fuyufu appears to be unfriendly but she has some nice sides as well, and she also has the kind of talent to build a good relationship with others.

Yuu who failed to counterattack could only stand still while looking down at the floor quietly.

“Then stop caring about me, just go and have fun”

“Eh? Those girls are busy with clubs so I just came here to play with a loner who seems to have nothing to do though?”

Oh sorry, could it be you haven't notice? As she looked into his face with a pitying look. Against that, Yuu could only clench his fist and hold down his frustration. His effort was worth some praises he thought, but that was an impossible demand to make.

He let out a sigh. It was his mistake for thinking that Fuyufu would cheer him up.

“Sorry but I don’t have any time to spare. Try someone else”

He said as he started walking. This is what you would call running away. He knew that it was impossible to win against Fuyufu verbally, if they continued who knew when his heart would break.

“Ah...”

Fuyufu's voice from behind sounded awfully weak.

But she didn't chase after him.

When he clearly saw that, he increased his speed and walked off.

Yuu’s back slowly disappeared from the hallway, and she couldn't even bid him a farewell

“Haaa...”

With an expressionless face, Kodzuchi Fuyufu let out a sigh. It felt like tears were flowing up, but she managed to hold it in. It wasn't like she was sad or anything, she was just a little nervous.

As the tension left, complaints started pouring out of her mouth.

“Idiot... that shut-in brat”

She knew that he was still shocked about his mother but it has been a year since then, he should’ve noticed his childhood friend’s attitude by now. It was just...

“Even though I did the trouble to comfort him”

“““No, no, no... you’re not comforting him at all!””””

Retorted from the group of three girls in softball and table tennis club uniforms who were watching over Fuyufu from afar.

Around 10 minutes away from the major private railways near the school, inside the famous market district there was a quiet station building.

And from there he exited the market district, and after around 20 minutes of walking he arrived at his destination. They say that half a century ago the real estate agent purchased this area all together and turned it into a residential area, but because of the low birth rates there has been a lot of vacant spaces.

At the back of that residential area right above the hill, stood a big house.

It was surrounded by grassy fields and woods, the house that looked dark and pale even in daylight was rumored to be haunted by the children of the neighborhood.

And in front of the haunted house, Yuu inserted a card key and typed in the password of the electronic lock. *Pssssssh...* the sound of air pressure escaped through the cylinder.

He opened the door and entered the house. The evening sunlight passed through the corner of the door. He closed the door from behind and the sounds from outside were severed and disappeared into the hollow.

This is the place that Kasugai Yuu returns to.

“.....”

He didn't think of anything in particular. After tossing some raw ingredients he brought from the market into the fridge, he walked straight to the living room.

He randomly threw his blazer and bag onto the floor and sat on the sofa while still wearing his uniform. His『CtG』 exclusive terminal, Rumeil, was on top of the table and was left charging.

After putting the familiar device onto his head, he pressed the start switch. A blue light shined from the device, showing that it was working. *Nnnnn...* The low startup sound somehow tickled his stomach.

And then, a song could be heard—

His consciousness started to fade away, melting and changing....

In a few seconds, his consciousness would no longer be in this world and have had made a journey to another world.



Quest :	Hunt Twenty Goblin.
Difficulty :	D.
Quest Type :	Monsters subjugation.
Special conditions :	Must be done by the player who received the quest.
Detail :	To hunt down Goblin troops dwelling in the abandoned house of Imperial City White Keter. The king who loves outstanding gladiators is looking for a person who's willing to take care of those Goblins all by himself. Oh brave hero, show me your strength on this perfect occasion.
Rewards are as followed.....	

It was at that moment a mail notification icon was seen on the corner of his vision and an attack from an axe was made.

Ignoring the mail for a while, he then quickly swung down his single-edged sword, a seax, onto the enemy's nape.

“Keh.....!”

The one who let out the low death throe voices, along with its head on the floor, was the Goblin monster. What was left from the remaining body was just an unsightly pile of meat—

In common RPGs they're the typical small fry monsters and are treated no different even in 『CtG』. It was an opponent that even a beginner player could win in a one-on-one fight. But on the contrary, you need considerable amount of skill to win against a large number of them.

Yuu (Clamp) watched over the dead corpse from above— and the next moment, large amounts of blood started flowing out of the wounds and some splashed onto the wall. The blood that dyed the wall appears to be sprayed out from the dead body.

CUT OFF!

SINGLE BLOW KILLED!!

As a special effect of the result of his attack, some words were displayed with the shed blood, it was a system called Blood Descript. It was said that the system was added by the graphic designer, and Yuu honestly thought it was a bad taste. But if this didn't exist, some players would feel something was lacking.

“They sure have a good (bad) hobby...”

He muttered as he watched over the surroundings. The passageway of the deserted house was filled with the smell of mold and blood coming out from the Goblin corpses lying on the floor. Even though it was a corpse, by the fact that it had lost all its HP it made it look like nothing but a dead mannequin that lacked vividness and animation.

And in the corner of his sight was a blinking icon. By swinging his line of sight he pulled it to the front. If it was a normal mail he would've opened it after he finished the quest, but the color of this icon was red— designating that it was an “Emergency”.

There was still one more Goblin lurking within the deserted building. But there shouldn't be a problem if it doesn't attack from a blind spot. While resting his back on the wall, Clamp opened up the mail.

Sender:	Mifa
Contents:	Somehow it's been born. Contact me immediately

He stared at it for a while.

“What the heck is this?”

It's incomprehensible. It was from Mifa whom he 《Married》 with after

defeating Megalon Evis. Her name was even written as the “Sender”, and a ring icon was shining next to her name.

But no matter how many times he read it, the contents of the mail was simply too abrupt and impossible to understand. Well, anyway, it said she wanted to contact him.

“Any at rate, I have to reply...”

As he said that, he sensed a presence. But there was no figure of a monster in his field of vision— and at the moment he looked up, the Goblin that was hiding above jumped at him!

Being caught completely off guard, he couldn't afford to swing his sword or even dodge. That’s why Clamp did neither.

He casually let go of his sword and caught the Goblin empty handedly. Even though it was short, the muscular Goblin was heavy and he got pushed down by the momentum. As he was being nailed onto the floor, he took a deep breath and then shouted

『Snatch !』

After usage of the 《Snatch》action, a notification sound of its success echoed through the building along with a burst of blood.

At the edge of Clamp’s vision was a message saying Skill success, you stole a “Hand Axe” .

What happened afterwards was Clamp kicking the Goblin’s body while simultaneously equipping the hatchet and attacking the goblin with it. It was strangely unlike him to be so impatient (or to be under pressure, if unrelated to sentences below).

—The 《Marriage》 he did just to achieve his goal.

—“It was just inside a game” but...

He couldn’t have not been curious. That’s right, the mail

“It’s from Mifa!”

When he split the Goblin head as if splitting a watermelon, the mail that was left open got dyed in red by the gushed out blood.



Within the churches that scattered throughout Dragons’ Cradle, you could find a mysterious mirror, when you went inside it you will arrive at the “Terminus Cradle”. The world spheres that consisted in 『CtG』 are all connected together in this relay world. It’s what you would call the starting point of all adventurers.

On the blue velvet floor nine mirrors were lined up, this place was the lowest layer called the Parnassus room. As a place for all the players that come and go all the time, it had the size of an event hall.

Boarding the elevator that hung at the middle will take you up to the market area.

Stores are sectioned in an orderly manner, regardless of the stalls large varieties of merchandise were lined up, from medical herbs to machine guns, items from various worlds were being traded here.

“This place is Messy as always...”

It was an overwhelming sight no matter how many times you saw it. The center of 『CtG』 service was done by NPC's (Their appearances were like other player, but their character was controlled by the program) who are in charge of the shops lined up around here.

And at the corner of the market area, there stood a facility called Guild Hotel, a facility that was often rented by particular communities as gatherings and meeting spots.

And at one of those rented facilities, inside a small room managed by the guild 【Labyrinth Troupe】 a girl was waiting for his arrival—

“What... Is that?What?”

Seeing what Mifa was holding, Clamp couldn't help but ask twice. He even forgot about Mifa who was holding the thing in question. Unable to hide his surprise, his hands were trembling in shock.



KASUGAI YUU
THE PLAYER WITH
NICKNAME OF
«CLAMP SCARABAEUS»
IN [CTG].

"I never heard
that baby will be
born after
«Marriage»..."

"Somehow, a
baby... was born"

KUGIMIYA MIHARU
THE GIRL WHO «MARRIED»
WITH CLAMP IN [CTG].

“Errrrmm...”

The thing wrapped in pale colored cloth, the thing that was resting on Mifa's lap was...

A baby.

She had the same hair color as Mifa, and the same eye color as Clamp.

The figure that was wrapped in fluffy and soft babywear appeared to be less than a year old. She blinked and looked at Clamp with her strangely powerful eyes, while holding onto Mifa's finger with her marshmallow-like round hand with the lightness of cotton.

Mifa, who wore a mixed expression of tears and laughter lifted her head and said,

“Somehow, a baby... was born”

.....

He has never heard about this. Never. It was true that he had the 《Marriage》 event with Mifa but, even so.... You know, they never did anything that could make a baby appear, and a system like this didn't exist in 『CtG』 in the first place.

Even so...

The moment he saw the figure of the baby, the feelings of guilt paired with anxiety (or worries, your choice) instantly froze his body. Somehow Fuyufu's face appears in his head, delivering a cold stare of contempt and disgust, that image was planted deep inside of him.

“K-Keep yourself together! I've been in panic from quite a while ago!”

“Aa.... Sorry. This is quite an unexpected situation...”

Because she made a loud voice earlier, the baby's gaze switched back to her. The baby's reflexive actions were all too abrupt and sudden. Mifa flinched and let out a fake smile. The baby was emotionless but opened her mouth curiously.

T-That's right. First we need to calm down. Clamp took a deep breath.

Calmly— Lets handle this situation calmly. Let's first sort out the known and unknown stuff, we need to first understand the current situation. There's the phrase "DON'T PANIC!" in the best-selling 『CtG』 strategy book , 『CtG Hitchhiker's Guide』 (unofficial), wasn't it.^[4]

First of all, let's hear what happened.

"Aside from the baby... what is that big thing?"

"Aaaa—"

Mifa didn't answer for a while. She glanced at "that big thing" while clumsily soothing the baby in her arms. Clamp followed her gaze and then,

"This child is the daughter from the two of you"

The one who said that...

Said that...

Was...

A stuffed doll.

On top of the two resting purpose beds in the cramped room, was a huge mushroom stuffed doll. It had limbs although it was a mushroom. Its width was as wide as its height and its face looked like it was doodled by an oil pen. That thing was the 『CtG』 mascot named 『Kinokino』^[5] based on an existing monster in the game. However, its size varied from fifty centimeters to 1 and up to 6 meters.

And that giant mushroom had certainly just spoke.

CRASH! The sound of Clamp hitting the wall of the hotel.

"It spoke!? I've never heard of a Kinokino that could speak!"

Clamp once again panicked like before but for a different reason. In response, the Kinokino gentlemanly lowered its head.

"Non. My name is Payakino, a Nanny NPC"

“Nanny...?”

“Oui. To take care of children born from the 《Marriage》 Event is my function as well as my duty”

Why it speaks like a monsieur even though it’s a nanny? It has high-pitched voice, or more like, it sounds synthesized. Its gender is also unclear. No, more than that...

“Wait a moment, I never heard that a baby would be born after 《Marriage》”

Yuu got lost in thought a bit, but if he believe in what this person said, then this NPC prepared by the system will answer it all.

The doll— Payakino then explain.

“Not knowing what will happen. That is the thrill of a RPG”

It’s a mushroom who loves saying whatever it wants.

But that sounds fair. It’s not like everything about the event is written on the manual, and considering this is an ultra-rare event no wonder that an unexpected thing like this would happen.

He was about to ask another question, but was interrupted by Mifa.

“I’ll explain first. Along with the time this baby appeared”

Mifa's story didn't go too well with her hair constantly being pulled by the baby, but summarizing it briefly it goes as follows:

When she logged-in as usual— she arrived at the Japanese-styled world, Bushido Grave southern church— And there stood Payakino that deliberately lowered its head in front of her.

Witnessing this mushroom..... thing, Mifa was truly startled, presumably more than she should have. Furthermore that mushroom was carrying a baby, and just like that it claimed that the baby was Mifa’s.

At first Mifa thought that there must've been some kind of mistake, but

Payakino knew in great detail about Mifa and Clamp, furthermore it had the 『CtG』 digital signature of Imagine Ekphrasis corporation that was shown in the extended manual.

In short— The pair of players was randomly given a child to raise and have it grown. But if either of the players refused, the event will become invalid and so on.

Naturally, this was not the kind of situation that can be simply solved by herself, Clamp's opinion was also required and so she called him to this hotel—

“—what do you think?”

Against Mifa's gaze after she finished the story, Clamp groaned.

“How... even if you say so”

It was a bit problematic. Clamp tried to look for information about this system he never heard of before, but...

“You know.... I think it's okay to raise her”

Mifa was unexpectedly up for the idea. Was *** just his imagination?

The baby then naturally switched her gaze to him.

Their “daughter” seemed to like Mifa's hair texture and continued to play with it.

Cute. He simply thought that.

Even though it looked like she was playing she didn't show a smile, could it be because she doesn't understand emotions yet, or that the Artificial Intelligence (AI) was just poor? Yuu who had never taken care of a baby before couldn't reach a decision. That's why he spoke what he thought.

“.....But, won't it be troublesome? Raising a child”

“You think? From what I read from the manual and heard from Payakino, we can just ask for all the knowledge and skills we need for it, and Payakino will also take care of her when we're logged out.

If you're too busy I'll try to raise her alone... and, isn't it okay to not think about it too much?"

She smiled comfortably.

"This is just a game after all"

The reason he agreed with that, was it because of Mifa's optimistic way of thinking? Or because of the guilt of having the baby disappear when he refused? Or that he just simply wanted to finish this event to the end? Even he himself was unsure.

But, on the contrary to Clamp's nodding, Kasugai Yuu felt uneasy and had worries about this strange chain of events.

The criteria aside, only those who are perfect with each other must marry, was that truly the right way of thinking. Even that person will one day regret that she chose the wrong partner. However an NPC baby was born without warning, it felt slightly off from the 『CtG』 developer's typical unscrupulous surprises.

It came from Kasugai Mana's game philosophy, Yuu's mother who continued to work for Imagine Ekphrasis in the third development office of 『Cradle to The Grave』 as the lead developer till the day of her death.

"Let's give her a name!"

Clamp, who was thinking while staring at the floor, got called and he returned his gaze to Mifa in a hurry.

"Name?"

"Yes. This child still doesn't have a name. We have to give her one"

Mifa held out the baby to Clamp when she said that. The baby's pitch black pupil looked straight to his eyes.

Uuuu.... He received the baby while trembling.

The baby that was now resting in his arms was unexpectedly soft and terrifyingly light. It was much lighter than the cat Fuyufu kept in her house.

The part where the gravity center did not changes when remained idle might because the lack of data inputted. And also the baby stayed the same even on Clamp's clumsy hand, instead of just simply meek it felt like it was lacking something.

—This child... did not possess a full human body. That was natural. NPC's are just people with a human body but not a human brain, let alone this baby that was just recently made.

He felt that.

He felt that really well.

Together, he wanted to blow life into this empty vessel, into the empty existence. Just like dolls that we treat as if having a personality.

He recalled back his childhood days as he thought about it. It was a time when Kasugai Yuu played with his first friend. What he did that time was, playing house.

It was just like the current situation. The girl from that time named the doll. Yes, the name was—

“How about... Haruha? This child's name”

It was a name that was taken from my memories. Although the baby in question didn't have any reaction in particular,

“Hee...?”

Somehow Mifa opened her eyes wide, not blinking at all.

“.....? What about it?”

“Aaa..... unn, nothing. I think it's a good name.

Haruha..... Haruha-chan huh. Nn, it has a cute sound to it”

After that she continued to repeat, Haruha, Haruha, again and again.

She seemed to like the name as well, the baby— Haruha was then returned to Mifa's arms.

While embracing the small body, Mifa narrowed her eyes gently and formed a broad smile with her mouth.

Clamp who felt something in his chest diverted his eyes.

And then the two... No, three of them, along with Payakino with its featureless face, continued to watch over the baby in delight.

And thus the two players who were wandering in the world of 『Cradle to The Grave』, Clamp and Mifa, were linked together by Haruha's arrival. Her birth was just too sudden and treated very lightly.

The time for them to learn about the meaning of that day, that moment, was still far in the future.



Two months have passed in a flash after that incident.

Every day they visited the guild hotel in Terminus Cradle— Not the hotel rented by 【Labyrinth Troupe】, but the one prepared by Payakino— Mifa and Clamp's first and furthestmost job was to talk with Haruha.

According to Payakino that resides at the corner of the room, the first thing Haruha needs for her growth was “Words” and after that is “Experience”.

Both of them simply had conversations with Haruha who continued to cling at them. They also did information exchange as part of their small talk.

When they were tired talking, they showed some replay videos. It was part of the Ramiel purchase bonus called private data storage, it would automatically record images in time of inevents.

This ended up affecting Yuu's real life. He would often be absentminded and would be reminded by others, like in this instance at the school hallway.

“Yuu”

“Ueeeuwawaaaa!!? F-Fuyufu...?”

“...What is it? You look strangely in a good mood I thought. And your reaction just now is like that of a man being caught having an affair”

“No way, that’s absolutely not, right?”

“Why are you asking yourself...? Well anyway,
.....Is something happening recently? You seems to be awfully want a hurry to go back”

“Nothing in particular... I’m just busy”

“Hmmm... Even so you appear to be way more energetic than before”

That might be true, he thought.

When Fuyufu pursued the reason, cold sweats started leaving his skin. Why did this happen? He tried to not think about it.

Payakino said, due to 『CtG』's system —embryo’s effects or whatever— Haruha's growth was accelerated. She became larger at an incomparable speed compared to normal children.

In fact, Haruha learned how to talk in a very short amount of time.

“Mommy!”

There was the figure of Mifa, raising her fist high to the air, taking a guts pose along with Clamp who was sitting down, depressed.

“Next say “Father”, please”

He patted Haruha's head, which has extended a considerable length. It had a ticklish soft feel. Haruha rings her throat several times, letting out a “Auuu” sound while burying her face into his chest like a mole.

Mifa also had some changes happening in her private life.

Previously, she logged-in around 8:00 to 9:00 at night and would log-out after midnight, but ever since Haruha was born she would appear in Terminus Cradle

at six o'clock. There were also days where she even showed up earlier than Clamp.

When asked why, she answered with,

“.....It's also because I want to meet Haruha, but stuff happened and I no longer have to do club activities. Because of that I now have time to spare”

Her answer was a bit worrisome, but...

She said clubs, so it means she was either a high school or junior high school student— He thought a little.

After two months Haruha had already earned the body and mind of a two year(s) old.

“Maybe it's about time we should show her the other world spheres”

Following Payakino's advice, they took Haruha outside. Since they were bringing a child, they only roamed around the cities to guarantee her safety.

For example the White Keter Imperial City in Dragons' Grave. From afternoon to midnight, millions of players are flooding this giant city and within such mess the small Haruha continues to cling to Mifa's arms while being simply being stunned.

They thought bringing Haruha who was an infant would stand out, but that didn't appear to be the case. Thinking back, baby NPC's normally exist in this world, and babysitting part-time jobs was one of the classical early quests.

However Haruha, unlike normal “predetermined sloppiness” baby NPC's have— doesn't wet herself or cry in the middle of the night. She doesn't even need to sleep or eat to begin with.

In the historical world, Bushido Grave Oedo capital, they watched the fireworks sparkling in the sky on a houseboat sailing above the waterway. Right on his side was Mifa wearing a relaxing light blue Kimono^[6], while singing a song in a clear beautiful voice.

It was a song he had never heard of before, and it didn't appear to be one of those stereotyped songs from the game.

“.....Do you like singing?”

When he asked, Mifa blushed a bit.

“Well, yeah, but it's just a hobby. I can't let out a loud voice at home so I practice here”

From her way of talking, it seems she played this game as a replacement for a karaoke box. Indeed, you don't need that much money to use the rental terminal (Ramiel), and it was way cheaper than going to a karaoke. Unsurprisingly, people with home-related circumstances numbered quite a lot.

“It's a foreign folk song I arranged myself..... I'm sorry if it's bad”

Mifa who shyly said that let out a modest singing voice in the sparkling night, her skill was truly great and made her words from earlier sound like mere modesty. Hearing that, he spoke what he had in mind,

“Your song, I love it. I don't know much about songs but it shows how clear your feelings are or something”

The transparent-like singing voice, as if fast-forwarded, lost its pitch and shook the moment Clamp saw Mifa's bewildered eyes.

After replying “Thanks...” with a blank look, Mifa resumed the song. And behind those words of hers, her face appeared to be shrinking.

(Eeeh? Did I sound like flattering...?)

As he thought about it, a warm sensation rode on his knees. It was Haruha. Daddy, daddy, she said in a lisp, like a little creature she was stirring restlessly above his knees.

Small. Round, wherever you stroke her. It was soft like a full-body cushion. She tried to stand wobbly but easily fell, and let out an “Uuu~” while staring at him curiously.

—Ultimately, she was cute.

That must be because she wouldn't cry in quirky timing, her diapers wouldn't suddenly be “that”, and she won't barf out her lunch, since she didn't have any of that, she was purely cute.

A daughter that won't cause trouble to her parents, it might truly be an ideal child to have.

But not seeing her sleeping and crying faces made Clamp (Kasugai Yuu) feel something was lacking. Mifa might be thinking the same thing as their eyes met each other.

But if compared to parents who were suffering from parenting their child, they couldn't really ask for such luxury.

Their wishes might never come true, but.

As Haruha slowly grew and learn more words, she began to show more emotions.

“.....Daddy, Mommy, you're slow!”

That day— A month after Haruha's birth.

With her five-year-old figure, Haruha made Clamp and Mifa kneel in a Seiza position^[7] in front of her.

In the usual hotel room. Haruha folded her arms together. It was amazing how a baby who used to be so round and small became..... so grown up and dazzling. And beside her was Payakino deliberately playing with a shina^[8], swinging it back and forth.

“You two said you'd come as soon as possible!”

Haruha's enraged voice sounded similar to Mifa's. And her awkward tone of her voice reflected an innocent childishness.

“The soy sauce at the market was on sell... and it was very crowded”

“I-I’m sorry... something little happened in the house”

The two of them earnestly apologized with a silky voice as if reading a script.

“Ah, look Haruha. I brought throwing knives. See, it has cute engravings on it, it’s small and light so even girl can easily use it!”

Clamp took out the throwing knives from his item box and showed it. It was within a small six blades set, and it was also popular as both an accessory and a decoration.

”Really? A weapon for a souvenir, that’s why boys are no good”

After staring at Clamp with eyes of contempt, Mifa turned to Haruha with a smile.

”Look Haruha, equip this 『Crimson Tree』 Mommy brought for you. It’s a Kimono armour sold in Bushido Grave!”

”Haruha won’t be fooled with presents!”

Various items were presented to please her but it seems that Haruha's displeasure won. *Tch*, Clamp was mad at his own lamentably.

Haruha's item storage was already filled full with presents like a children guitar, canned slimes, dragons’ bones (fake), and mechanical dolls from the two of them. The small Haruha used to be unconditionally happy from their present and that made them want to give her more.

“You two just overdid it!”

With a sullenly sigh, Haruha sat down on Mifa’s knee.

Her mind’s growth seemed to be slower than her body, even though she would often walk around by herself, Haruha was still a spoiled mole. She loved playing with the weapons Clamp and the others brought for her but she loved hugging Clamp and Mifa even more.

“Haruha..... waited a long time you know”

That's why her eyes looked very lonely as she stared at the both of them while twisting herself in Mifa's arm.

That's right. Haruha had always, waited.

Not just waiting together with Payakino at daytime. Even though she had a place to sleep, as a resident of 『CtG』, the action of “Sleeping” did not exist within her. So at day and night, she continues to wait for Clamp and Mifa fully awake the entire time.

From now, let's give up soy sauce sales and protect your promise. Said Payakino through its mind while beating Yuu (Clamp) with its shinai.

“Hiyaaa!?”

Screamed Mifa as she saw the head of a Kobold^[9] fly up into the air. The monster's face that appeared was suddenly cut by Clamp as it came across—
Critical Hit!!

The blood splashed in a flashy manner and formed letters. Mifa avoided the bloody shower so it didn't hit the lantern she was carrying. After that she weakly let out an amazed voice,

“Ughh..... it's how amazing you're fine with that. A severed head..... even now I'm still not okay with it. And those that walk with two legs are especially scary”

Mine area of Dragons' Grave. “It's about the time for Haruha to learn about battle, take her with you and show her the drill” Following Payakino's advice, Clamp and Mifa are currently previewing low difficulty quests for the plan in the future.

Subjugation quest 【Tunnel Kobold Extermination】 was what the name implied. A quest to hunt a certain number of Kobolds within the back of the mine, it was a quest for beginners.

While wielding his blood dyed sword, Clamp illuminated the surroundings with his lantern. It was then Mifa asked,

“Is it because you’re a boy? Are you type who likes zombie movies?”

“It’s not like that, but...”

Letting out a troubled voice, Clamp tried to come out with a proper answer.

“You often say it too right. This is just a game, you said”

“Even though it’s this real?”

“Exactly because it’s this real. Having my strength increased making me able to perform amazing movements, every time I perform superhuman-like skills through semi-automatic combat I feel an ascertained difference between my actual self.

The strong me right now is not actual me. That’s why I can properly separate both”

“Not your real self huh...”

Clamp who was being wary of his surroundings did not see Mifa who was looking down in bitterness. Half consciously, Clamp spoke what he had in mind.

“The more realistic a virtual reality becomes, the more it decreases the player’s external sense to the real world. It was my mother's theory, that's why this game—”

“Mother?”

Clamp let out a bitter face as he realized his own mistake. And it was a face that was unthinkable coming from that composed self-confident “Clamp of Scarabaeus”. Something inside Mifa started being fueled.

“So your mom plays game too. What kind of person?”

“this isn't important right?”

But his rejection by not wanting to face her face, instead did nothing but lure her interest even more. Mifa was just that kind of person.

“It’s okay right. We’re husband and wife for one”

While continuing to plead, Mifa clung to Clamp’s empty hand. Mifa then confirmed her victory after realizing that Clamp had just stopped his breath.

“Why are you so flustered? This is just inside a game isn't it?”

Clamp who got a point taken groaned, and while being upset he said,

“Come on, let’s look more into the back”

And they begun to walk while Mifa kept hanging onto his arm.

After a while, the dim light of the lantern started to fades away, Mifa let out a little gasp and they continued to walk through the dark tunnel.

They walked little by little, the heat coming from the snuggled up pair made them grow restless. But that heat was not the heat coming from the lantern's flame or magic. That's why it wouldn't cool down no matter how much time had passed.

“It might be just a game”

The one who speak after that was Mifa.

“Just a game, but Haruha is cute, right”

“.....That’s right”

The moment Clamp formed a smile with his mouth, Mifa held down her chuckle.

“You’re just like me.....”

After holding back her laughter she let out a smile, and the remaining heat disappeared.

“What happened Yuubocchi^[10]? Thinking hard like that is very unlike you”

“What the heck was..... that? It sounds like some derogatory term coming from a fairy tale”

“Sounds like a name from a fairy right? A person who's always alone = could be a strange creature that only I can see, that is 『Yuubocchi』”

“It sounds pretty scary...”

He was in the cafeteria during lunch break when Fuyufu called him out.

Even though he got his savings that his mother left behind, he couldn't afford wasting money when there was a future to think about. On the other hand, because of 『CtG』 he doesn't have much time to make lunch, so he's been living off one bread a day.

However a little while ago in 『CtG』, he was in the middle of talking with Haruha But lost consciousness and was forced to logged out— In other words “Sleep Failing” — caused by his lack of sleep and declining health. In order to spend more time with Haruha, he began to eat properly and also eat healthy food every day.

That’s why, in order to get an inexpensive meal every day he goes to the cafeteria, and naturally eating together with Fuyufu becomes a daily occurrence. He stared at Fuyufu who was sitting on the other side of the table with her Kitsune Udon^[11], and let out a terribly vague question,

“Fuyufu, do you think there are hearts dwelling inside computers?”

“What’s up with the out of the blue question?”

Maybe because her emotions were bland, but Fuyufu appeared to be spacing out but even so her academic score was pretty high. Unlike Yuu who only played games, Fuyufu read a lot of books.

After sipping her udon while raising her hair so that it didn’t get into the soup, she answered,

“It depends on your definition of “heart”, but it’s impossible to create self-consciousness through programs and calculation, this is a theory I heard

before. Something about quantum brain theory or whatever”

“But doesn't that only apply to *current* computers?”

Fuyufu responded with a “You mean?” face. Yuu also felt that he had become too stubborn. While pointing at her with the chopsticks he used to stab his fish hamburger with , he continued.

“It’s 『CtG』. You know, the computer used for that is known for having stronger capabilities than any other. If it has that much power, won’t it be possible to create a human-like mind?”

But Fuyufu unceremoniously shook her head.

“It’s not the problem of capability or processing power. It’s the nature of the problem itself. No matter how fast it calculates, even a computer that can respond to a diverse amount of situations, would still give the same result as any other computer. Even if it can create the same entrance and exit as a human, it won’t be able to create the same maze inside. The “Heart” is that maze. If you want to create the same thing..... there’s no other choice but to give those computers flesh and blood as well”

After saying it like a javelin, she continues.

“Or could it be, Yuu, you heard something about it? The computer used in that..... did you hear that from your mother?”

Fuyufu let out a face of regret as she said that. It might just be a slip of tongue mentioning his mother, but it was impossible to say that he didn't care about it.

“Could it be, a one-in-the world machine exists somewhere..... no way, I’ve never heard anything about it. Even if I heard about it I wouldn't know”

“That might be so”

Because of the abrupt agreement, the conversation stops for a while. Over three quarters of the seats in the school cafeteria were filled with students bustling. Within that environment, the distant they had that allowed them to

distinguish the sound of dishes, that distant just like old time ago.

In contrast to Yuu who fell silent, Fuyufu opened her mouth after she finished swallowing her udon.

“Yuu..... did something happened in that game?”

His heart jumped. Words spoken can't be taken back. Fuyufu persisted with her gaze.

“Could it be..... Non Player Character, is it? Did you fall in love with one or something? That's why you asked stuff about the heart and all.....”

It wasn't a direct hit, but it was a blow that managed to graze his neck. Even so,

“Of course not, it's not like that”

It wasn't a lie so his voice was straight. But Fuyufu continued to press on the matter.

“.....Really? Then why do you look strangely happy recently?”



“I-It’s just your imagination”

Somehow an image of Mifa tilting her head mumbling “Nn? Nn?” appeared on his head. It wasn't her. She was not a NPC, much less a girlfriend. She was something else. The thing that happened in the mine was just her messing around.

Fuyufu suspiciously stared at him and then averted her eyes in displeasure.

Fuyufu stayed silent after that. After she silently finished consuming her udon, she took a paper napkin and started folding it.

“.....Yuu. Do you know why I don’t play that game (『CtG』)?”

“Eh..... Because you’re not interested in it?”

She had always been like that. No matter how many times he recommended it, Fuyufu had never laid her hands on 『CtG』. When Yuu became a teenager he gradually became addicted to the game his mother helped develop, and ever since then his distance with Fuyufu slowly grew larger and larger. But.

“Wrong”

Incorrect. Fuyufu abruptly stood up, holding her tray and turned away. And then while showing her back, she told the correct answer.

“—It's because I hate it”

After seeing the small back go off?, he dropped his eyes to one of the paper cranes left on the table. As if harboring the same displeasures of its creator, it was directed straight at his direction. He naturally leaked a sigh.

It seems he had offended her somehow, but he couldn't figure out why. It was pathetic. It was always like that. Kasugai Yuu would never be able to understand others’ feelings unless said out loud.

Speaking of not knowing, his question towards Fuyufu still didn't provide a satisfying answer.

(—No matter how high-spec the computer is, it can’t bring the “heart” to life. Then, is Haruha who express's so much emotion also a... “Fake”?)

But Haruha was clearly different compared to other NPC's. Even though the NPC's in 『CtG』 possessed surprisingly large amounts of actions, it was simply piles of numbers of normal behavior patterns. If you continued to talk to them, you would feel an inevitable sense of Déjà vu. At first Yuu also thought that Haruha was one of those kind of things.

However Haruha did not feel or smell like a program at all. Every day she showed various different expressions on a whim and it never stopped changing—he had never seen her showing the “same face” at all. It might be that she changed as she grew, creating a new behavior pattern each passing day.

But there was certainly moments where such a trick couldn't be explain. That was probably because she had what was called wisdom.

“Daddy, what is that?”

It was in the usual hotel room where she asked that.

This time Clamp was facing the item 『Parchment』—A paper—he spread on the table. Mifa was late because of some errands she had in the real world, so he was together alone with Haruha.

He folded the parchment paper and created a shape.

“It's Origami^[12]. I'm making a 『Yakko-san』”

”Origami? Yakko-san?”

Haruha climbed the table with her own body and peeked at what was in his hands. He attempted to give an answer to her bright sparkling eyes but—it was unexpectedly hard to explain.

That's why he just continued to fold quietly and finally completed the “Yakko-san”.

When it was presented to Haruha, she received it curiously. She sat on top of the table and inspected it closely.

Looking at her like that reminded him of the young figure, Fuyufu, and Origami

was a play they learned together. The first time he finished making one she also look at the paper crane he made just like her.

“What is, this?”

“What do you think this is?”

The reason why he returned the question was because he recalled back the conversation he had with Fuyufu before. Can Haruha, who was born from a computer, “feel” shapes?

Haruha did not answer immediately. She just continued to stare deeply at the “Yakko-san”, and then answered.

“Is this... Haruha?”

It was the time for Clamp to be troubled now.

“Nnn..... half correct. That is the paper model of a person who used to work as a servant^[13]. Look, it has legs and arms right? In other word it’s a doll”

“A doll...”

Haruha looked at “Yakko-san” for a while and then stroked her head with her finger. Then all of a suddenly she looked up.

“Haruha want to make one too. A more, bigger one!”

The girl’s hands were moving like magic.

She only saw Clamp making it once, but she folded the papers with terrifying precision without any hesitation. Open and by the time he noticed, “Yakko-san” was already completed.

He had heard that an origami had a mathematical structure, and this was precisely that. Even 『CtG』, which possessed a lot of mechanical skills, didn't have one called origami auto-folding. Nevertheless, the skill that Haruha possessed— was certainly a mechanical skill.

As if proving that his hunch was correct, Haruha once again folded another

“Yakko-san” in an instant, it was identically the same as the previous one. Rather than the same work, it was more of a copy.

(As I thought..... she’s different from us)

It was an obvious thing, why was he disappointed in realizing it now? It was a strange story. What operated Haruha was 『CtG』 and the thing that operated that nothing other than a computer, accomplishing small things like this was not surprising at all.

—However, Haruha’s hand stopped as she worked on the third one.

Opened and folded again, after some trails and errors “Yakko-san” was finally finished, but somehow it looked strangely different from the previous ones, its head was a little too big.

“? This is.....”

In response to the confused Clamp, Haruha let out a warm fufun voice and a smile, and then she asked.

“What do you think this is?”

“Nn..... could it be, Payakino-san?”

The one who answered that wasn’t Clamp, but Mifa who appeared out of nowhere. Haruha sharpened her mouth saying “It was a quiz for Daddy!”, Mifa replied with a sorry and lifted Haruha's body up and put her down onto the floor.

”Sitting on the table is bad”

”But then I won’t be able to make origami”

Rather than mother and daughter, both of them looked more like sisters. He then returned his gaze towards the four origami on the table.

There were two big “Yakko-san”, one mushroom-like thing, and one small “Yakko-san”.

Needless to say— It was himself, Mifa, Payakino, and Haruha together.

““Is this... Haruha?””

““A doll””

He recalled back Haruha’s words.

Clamp— Kasugai Yuu, felt hatred towards himself.

(Why did I think like that? “As I thought..... she’s different from us”?)

Even though he bad mouthed Fuyufu who denied the personality that was born from this game, he had just treated Haruha like an object. But she put him in. Within the origami family, the figure Clamp was in there.

She was..... she such a child. Furthermore,

Being taught only the concept of “Origami”, Haruha created a mushroom-shape by herself. She could create “free ideas” from given information. No matter how splendid an artificial intelligence was, there was no way it could do that.

Mysterious, strange, but helplessly cute “daughter”.

Haruha.

(How should I treat this child?)

Recently, because he prioritized meeting Haruha, he had neglected his goal to fully complete 『CtG』. Raising a child was also not an event that was a part of it.

Whatever happened, he must play through everything in 『CtG』.

The more he liked Haruha, the more troubled he became.



”Ahahaha”

But strangely, he no longer worried about his concern when he looked at Haruha's smile.

Two months have passed since Haruha was born. She had quickly obtained what human's called the physique of seven-year-old.

“It’s shaking. It’s shaking, daddy!”

Just a while ago she was walking like an awkward doll but was now running around in the carriage like an energetic cat.

Western-styled world Sphere “Gunman’s Grave”. The powers of firearms in here were multiple times stronger than in any other Spheres, this was a world for Gunman.

Starting from the capital city, you would find huge railways connected to various locations across the towns and villages in this world, it was essential for traveling in Gunman’s Grave and was a tourist attraction. It was a large locomotive that you wouldn't be able to find anywhere in modern Japan, and the views outside the shaken carriage were magnificent as well.

Today was a public holiday in the real world, so Clamp and Mifa entered 『CtG』 during the day. Since they had a lot of time to spare, they asked Haruha where she wanted to go and she answered that she wanted to try riding a train.

And so, the three of them boarded the train and enjoyed the scenery from the window. It was wilderness as far as the eye could see. From a distant you could see a wild Land Worm (A large roundworm-like monster) being hunted by a couple of cowboys with their monster rifle.

When he was captivated with this virtual landscape, Mifa stood from her seat and yelled at Haruha.

“Haruha, don’t do that, you’re bothering the other guests so please calm down”

”Okke~!”



Haruha waved the sleeves of her red Kimono while noisily replying the word of her mother. It was a present from Mifa made in Bushido Grave, ependymal (upper garment) armor.

It was Haruha's first “dress up”.

“She’s quite energetic”

He leaked out a smile seeing the scene of this mother-daughter exchange.

The border passages in the carriage were divided into two rows. Sitting right on the other side of him and Mifa were a kind-looking elderly couple.

From the small talk they had before, this couple wanted to enjoy their leisure time after retirement but they were worried about their health if they actually went on one..... eventually they decided on going to the virtual world instead. They both loved each other's easy way of thinking and they were a very harmonious married couple.

“That young lady in the Kimono, whose little sister is she?”

“Ha, haa...”

Clamp and Mifa's replies were inevitably ambiguous. They couldn't help but to speak humbly when talking to older people. Even so, if they answered honestly it would definitely sound more like a lie.

Unaware of their confusion, the elderly couple spoke in a merry voice as if saying “this is the main topic”.

“Could it be, the both of you are a couple?”

“”Ah, no, definitely not””

This time, the both of them slammed the table and stood up, and simultaneously answered. Both of them were certainly a married couple in『CtG』 but not a tiny bit of a “couple” even once.

The old lady seemed to be a little disappointed. And the husband next to her rebuked with “Don’t be so thoughtless” and changed the topic.

“Using a travel PC, even old people like us and that young lady can go on a trip without worry”

Travel PC (Player Carrier) was one of 『CtG』's unique systems that allowed youngsters and even elderly to experience the virtual world. They did not receive any damage from battle or a player attack. It was commonly known as “Travel” and even players below twelve years old could essentially dive into the game.

In 『CtG』 body damage and endurance value (HP) were valued from an entirely different concept. Body damage and wounds received will slowly heal and regenerate even when the remaining HP was low, but if all of the HP was completely gone it would be an automatic game over. But in case of the Travel PC, their HP was infinite and would never receive a game over in battle

“I still intend on staying as an active gamer. But playing on a normal avatar is bad for my heart or something and this wife of mine won’t let me”

“But dear, this is different from a video game you know”

The wife’s words were then interrupted. Before they knew it, Haruha had appeared beside her, pulling her sleeves. Haruha looked up at the old lady, and curiously said,

“Haruha is not a Travel PC?”

As she just said, while being a child Haruha was not a Travel PC. That’s why Payakino told them to watch over her very carefully.

However, from the eyes of people who didn't know the circumstances it was a mere violation of the terms.

“Hn? But, kid at your age—”

“But Haruha is.....Mogyuh!?”

“N-No! It’s not that! This kid doesn't really know how the system works so!”

Mifa let out a fake smile as she forcibly held Haruha to prevent her from saying anything further. The elderly couple was then easily convinced and stroked

Haruha's head, in exchange Haruha narrowed her eyes happily.

It was a pretty intense situation thinking of an excuse surrounding Haruha's circumstances that even her own parents hadn't fully understood yet."

The weather outside was good and the scenery that was spread was also beautiful, they were blessed with a cheerful companion in the journey. Mifa, and also Haruha seemed to be in a good mood as well.

I'm glad we came here— this was the praise he wanted to earn for today's holiday trip in the afternoon."

But all of a sudden, the train took an abrupt break in the middle of the wilderness.

In a way, this could be called a well-executed train robbery.

The railway was blocked by a drove of large Land Worms, it was a good thing that the train stopped at the right time.

But the safe box that had been placed on the wagon collapsed afterwards.

The strength of the security NPC's were nothing great, and could be easily overwhelmed by a player. It must have been going according to the plan so far. But the safe was empty inside. It seems they were given false information from the mischief of other players.

And then.

The four angry robbers boarded the carriage Clamp and the others were in.

"Okay, don't move! Frankly saying, I'm really strong!"

The one who shouted throughout the train was a bearded man who seemed to be the leader of the robbery. He appeared to be old due to his beard, but his voice was unexpectedly youthful. He must be at the age of a young adult.

"This is a robbery collecting funds for conquering Marionette Grave. We're on a completely different level compared to those who are just playing around! Got it!?"

What the man said “Marionette Grave” was a newly released world Sphere, a world of cyberpunk. In order to conquer it, expensive equipment was essential. Within groups of inpatient players, there were people who dared to cross the dangerous line in order to collect funds just like this.

Seeing from Expansion (AR) mode, all information was filtered other than their level, and around their shoulders there was a red placards (tag) floating above them. If someone tried to attack someone in public facilities he/she would receive a 《Criminal》 red tag, and they will be registered as a target of a subjugation quest for a period of time .

As expected from those who wanted to be on top, their levels were certainly higher than Clamps.

“Listen, we will collect 1/3 of your money after this. If you quietly give it to us, we won’t kill you. Not a bad deal right?”

Penalty given when dying was “Losing half a of all gold in possession”, it was certainly not a bad deal. More than anything, even though the pain was reduced, dying in this overly realistic 『CtG』 world would give quite a fear until until used to. It was quite a valid threat in its own way.

The other three men under the bearded man walked through the cramped passage ways and started collecting, each of them threatening their prey with their guns.

“H-Hiaaaa..... D-don’t shot! I will die!”

One of them pointed his gun at a girl wearing a nun (Sister) outfit who sat nearby. All the other robbers were one tier lower than the bearded man but still a higher level than himself. They were also considerably stronger than Mifa as well.

(Maybe... No, don’t think about resisting.....)

Peeking at Haruha who was hugged tightly by Mifa, he let out a sigh. If he was alone he would think of resisting and would prepare to gamble a Game Over, but now he had Mifa and Haruha with him.

Seeing the passengers being obedient, the bearded man licked his lips in

delight. The color of his pupils appeared to have brightened and it seems he had activated the Extended (AR) mode vision.

“First of all, in order to not let anyone do anything strange in the middle of collecting money, we will be taking some hostages.

.....The first one will be that pseudo Sister, and who's next. No matter how much they resist, we can't really make a Travel who can't be killed as a hostage”

Somehow he got a bad feeling, and it was a hit.

As if licking the passengers within, the bearded man shot around with his gaze, and his eyes stopped at Mifa.

“Oi, you woman there, you're not a Travel right!”

Being called, Mifa screamed in response. Clamp's waist was floating above the seat.

(This is bad...!)

It was a frustration he had never felt before, to have lost his composure.

But that anxiousness was not because of Mifa.

”No, Haruha don't!”

By the time they realized, she had already escaped from Mifa's arms.

The girl in red Kimono— Haruha left the passage, and faced the bearded man around seven meters away.

The bearded man, the other robbers, and the passengers must have all realized after Mifa raised a scream. The bearded man looked at Haruha as if he had just inhaled poisonous gas.

“Oi..... what is it brat. I don't have business with a Travel—”

The bearded man's words were interrupted.

sharply.

He then noticed a Throwing Knife stuck on his shoulder.

“Oooh....?”

It was a unique sensation of 『CtG』. Because of the system, the pain was changed to a slight sense of discomfort so you wouldn't feel any actual pain. But that's why the sensation of cold metal transmitted through his flesh could be clearly felt— passing beyond the realm of pain, he was haunted by an illusion of being a corpse.

And then the bearded man saw. The young girl in red Kimono, slowly come close and threw the second knife.

So casually, so agilely, and without hesitation.

Now to his flank. As if being sucked into the gap of his bones, the sharp blade continued to invade inside until it reached the handle.

“—Hey”

The voice who called for the bearded man was from no one else, Clamp couldn't recognize it for a moment. This cold and sharp piercing voice.

“Why?”

Realizing that the shining Throwing Knives on Haruha's hands were his gift, for the first time he recognized the owner of this penetrating cold voice.

The bearded man finally realized the opponent who attacked him was, he then glared at Haruha with wide open eyes and pointed his automatic gun at her.

”Why do you do this?”

But Haruha was undaunted. Her large unwavering eyes, as if being sucked in pushed the bearded man to his limit. He pulled the trigger of the gun.

“W-What— You... shitty brat!”

- BANG*. The sound of the gunshot from the bearded man's hand. Even though it was in a virtual world, no one would stand watching a scene of a

kid being shot.

However, Haruha was unharmed.

The sleeves of her red Kimono were fluttering like a flower petal. With one rotation, it seemed as if she was dancing.

In that moment, while throwing knives with both of her hands she dodged the bullets with incredible swiftness. It was as if knowing where the bullet was going in advance, truly a bland miracle.

The knives that we thrown pierced the bearded man's right shoulder, receiving damage on his leg the bearded man fell on his knees and laid on the floor. If he felt pain he would be screaming, but fortunately that did not happen. But then he turned his gaze towards Haruha— and his anger turned into fear.

In both of Haruha's hands, the next set of knives had already appeared. A small sized weapon like Shuriken^[14] that could be hidden under your sleeves could be replenished/equipped immediately if you had a skill called 《weapon sleeve》.

The shadow from her bangs covered her face to her nose. The only thing seen on that face was just the cold light from her eyes, but that stare of hers appeared to be showing nothing but apathy to the bearded man.

That knife, those eyes...

With no mercy or hesitation, the girl showed the blade in her hand. In a way, it was really child-like. Because she was a child, she could beat down her opponent without showing any anger.

The girl's movements had reached the front of the bearded man's face. The cold wind was cut by the knife, this time the knife changed objectives from throwing to slashing.

"Haruha, was looking forward to this you know!"

And then.

Haruha stared at the intruder who interrupted her holiday with all her might, and naturally let out a condescending voice.

"Mommy and daddy said that we would have a lot of fun. Haruha was looking forward to it!"

The face seen from the shade was no longer a cute spoiled mole. Her face—her face had clearly exploded with anger.

"A lot!
Haruha endured a lot!
and finally! Finally!
It's finally!! It's finally the day when we will play a lot!
but why!? Why don't you understand? Is old man stupid!?
Why? Haruha said, why? Why would you do such a mean thing!?"

It was a child's impeachment yelling to children for children. She believed that breaking her "Promised holiday" was nothing but pure evil and did not doubt that even slightly, it was the unconditional trust she had for her family and the world. And now all of that was crushed, due to that it also enhanced her childish emotions and caused an explosion inside her.

Naturally, the bearded man didn't understand what she meant. He just listened to her while being dumbfounded. He turned his head left and right searching for an answer but all he got was a stare from the girl in the nun outfit.

Compared to the bewildered man, Haruha is way way younger. She was way too young to understand other people's position and circumstances. That was why she was so straightforward, selfish, and merciless.

"A thing like this—"

The blade in her hand, as if sliding from the sky, sliced the man.

"Is bad you know!"

The blade tore across the bearded man's neck and formed a cross, the blood spraying out vigorously formed the **Critical Hit!!** words on the ceiling.

In that opportunity.

"W-What the heck is this brat!?"

The other robbers who couldn't react properly to Haruha's overly imposing actions finally moved.

The first to react was the person who stood right beside the bearded man, he pulled out his revolver but was then interrupted by the nun woman from earlier.

In nearly the same time, the tall robber who was right in front of Clamp raised his rifle and aimed at Haruha. His aim was quickly blocked by Mifa who had jumped out of her seat, but there was no reason for him to re-adjust his aim. He pulled the trigger and—

That moment, Clamp moved as well.

While pushing down the tall man, he simultaneously took his gun. Along with a 『Snatch!』 notification sound, the message saying You stole item “Automatic M1905”^[15] was displayed.

”Agh, bastard!”

”I won't say sorry”

Sorry— before he finished saying that, he started shooting down every bullet available in the magazine, the guy might've not even caught the word he said earlier. After around five shots, the guy's HP drops to zero and his body turned into a lifeless mannequin.

After he shot out every bullet, Clamp instantly threw the gun and stood up.

Then.

His eyes met a big-framed robber aiming his rifle at him. The gun was pointed straight at his head.

””Haha””

Feeling tension between each other, both of them exchanged a maniac smile.

The robber then changed into a serious look after a moment and pulled the trigger.

There was not enough distance where he could simply avoid all the bullets; and if he got hit like this he wouldn't be saved. Normally he would get a Game Over in

this situation, but.

The bullet missed. No, the prey (Clamp) just disappeared from the place the robber aimed at.

”.....He disappeared? How? Did he logged-out because of an external influence?”

”Nope— Got you”

The moment after that word was heard, the disappointed robber’s torso was blown away onto the air.

Clamp who had returned back into a shooting position instantly shot him with a Sawed-off shotgun^[16]. The robber who got shot and shredded into pieces, was clinging onto an unattended seat and glared at Clamp.

”What the heck with that instant warping..... was it the connection lag that has been happening these days?”

Clamp didn't answer him and walked off, ignoring the robber. The robber’s eyes brightened, a sign which shows that he was trying to check Clamp’s player status.

”Clamp.....? Are you..... are you that “Clamp of Scarabaeus”?Wait, if so your level is too low—”

”Then you got the wrong person”

Not waiting for the robber to be convinced, Clamp bombarded the rest of the shots inside the shotgun. The mannequin that lost its head rolled on the floor.

Looking at the surroundings, the last remaining robber was turned into a mannequin, he must've been taken down by another passenger.

The mannequin that used to be the bearded man, suffering from its miserable fate had its entire body pierced with knives. The blade sunk deeply inside and its lower half was drowned in a sea of blood flowing from out of its neck.

And at the end of this sight, the girls were there. Clamp’s “Family”.

Mifa who had trembling shoulders held Haruha tightly, and Haruha who questioned her mother's action.

When his eyes met hers, she showed a bright golden smile.

"Daddy! I beat him down with the knife you gave me!"

Other than a forced smile, what else could he show?

"Hey..... that kid isn't a Travel PC?"

(Here it comes.....)

The first thing everyone asked after everything settled down was that. Of course, it was about his "Daughter" who was in the middle of the room being held by Mifa

"She appears to be an elementary school student no matter how I see her....."

The man's voice that was representing the other passengers was strong. A non-Travel PC under the age of thirteen was against the law.

"Well..... You see, this kid is—"

He wanted to cover it up but wasn't able to come up with a good lie. Kasugai Yuu wasn't particularly smart or had a foul mouth, he was just a simple high school boy.

He might as well have spoken the truth.

Haruha was a baby born as a part of a 《Marriage》 event. That was why he didn't have to worry. Because she wasn't a human, but.

—Terrifying. It was not a joke.

He was convinced. Haruha was not a human, only an existence within the game. That was the truth. But once it has been revealed, how will others treat Haruha from now on?

An NPC that could think, create, and possess human emotions. There was no

need to recall back the conversation he had with Fuyufu, Haruha had easily exceeded the limit of an artificial intelligence. She was an impossible existence.

Clamp and Mifa thought she was cute, but that was only because they had been with her for a long time. But in the eyes of other people, as an errant object she was a subject of their curiosity and fear.

Fearful. They were afraid to be in contact with a non-human like Haruha. They were afraid to be targeted by her. If everyone learned the truth about Haruha, could Clamp and Mifa treat her the same way as before? Would they wake up from this dream?

Still— it was too early to think like that. Just a little bit more, please let her be as what she is now.

At the same time Yuu reached his conclusion.

”Haruha is— this kid is.....”

Mifa stood up and began talking. Clamp reflexively put his hand on Mifa's shoulder. Her voice was shaking.

Mifa put her hand on Haruha's head who didn't get the situation. Mifa declared in a loud voice.

”This kid is... is not——ach!!”

.....

And there was silence.

Well, of course. These were truly troublesome words— and if said with a big voice pushed with only courage it was natural. In addition, the beautiful girl, Mifa, had called out very desperately.

”No, not about that...”

The player who had asked about Haruha perplexedly let out a word of denial. They became silent again. It was an atmosphere where everyone goes quiet. Except one person, Haruha, who watched over the hard faces of the adults

restlessly.

It was not that she was stupid or dense (My child is clever and intelligent you know), and not even because she was young. She just simply didn't understand how “Special” she was. When Yuu thought about that he somehow felt a bit sad, and tears seemed to be flowing out.

And within this situation...

Out of the blue, the door of the vehicle was suddenly opened. It was the entrance that was blocked by the robber from earlier. Naturally, everyone's attention concentrated there— They were all amazed.

“Well, hello and hello~”

Because, somehow a giant mushroom had just entered the carriage.

—It was as you expected. Payakino lowered its head as if it was a cowboy hat.

“AAaa-! It's Payakino-san!”

The first one who raised her voice was Haruha, and she dived into it, with all her might onto the stuffed-doll body. The Nanny NPC caught the cannonball-like girl.

“Bonjour. Monsieur mon ami”

And then somehow, it spoke out a greeting that sounded like it was coming from the TV version of a “Detective Poirot”^[17] rather than actual French. Imitating that, Haruha repeated the word “Monsieur mon ami” over and over.

Everyone within the carriage— Even Clamp and Mifa— were taken aback, and on behalf of the elderly couple the husband opened his mouth.

“Haa..... So, who are you?”

“Me?”

And then Payakino, while saying “Well up'n go” rose Haruha up and tossed her into a big bag. And from inside, the muffled voice of Haruha could be heard—

“Waaai! I’m inside a bag!”

Everyone’s eyes went wide wondering what had just happened, and then the mushroom shamelessly introduced itself.

“I am the wilderness kidnapper, Paya The Kid!”

”Eh?”

Not waiting for anyone to respond, Payakino turned backwards and jumped onto the back of the horse waiting outside.

“Yeeehaa~ go Silver Star!”

Riding the horse, it quickly disappeared in an instant. —

.....

While carrying the bag that had Haruha inside.

””AAAAA!!! SHE GOT KIDNAPPED!!?””

Finally understanding the situation Clamp and Mifa screamed in unison, and their voices echoed throughout the wilderness...

About an hour after, everyone had gathered in the usual hotel room.

”.....Well anyway we're saved”

Just a while ago they were frustrated from having their travel interrupted, but now Haruha was glaring at the card in her hand while learning how to play old maid with Mifa, Clamp was lowering his head against Payakino.

”Honestly, I'm out of options in those kind of situations”

After that event, they left the carriage pretending to chase over Paya The Kid, and regrouped back with Haruha and Payakino who had returned earlier. They managed to leave the scene without answering anything..... maybe, he wasn't really sure.

Payakino unceremoniously assured him.

"What are you talking about? This is a part of my job as a Nanny NPC. You don't have to worry about it, everything happened today will be taken care by people above so it's okay. They should've erased all evidence, not even a dust left"

"Thank you... but, it sounds kind of scary"

Anyway, He would learn from this matter and avoid having any naive thoughts like before.

"May I ask..... how should I treat Haruha from now on?"

"How, you mean?"

"When she grows bigger, she can go out without being suspected as a Travel PC anymore. But, when that time comes we..... what should we do?"

Indeed. Haruha possess an ability to perform independent actions, in the『CtG』 world she was a "free" being. She needed protection for now, but in the future she would have to be independent enough to act on her own.

—What will happen when Haruha no longer needed "Parents"?

It was not explained in the extended manual given by Payakino.

"I see. Your worry is understandable, but it's okay to consider it more carefully"

"Carefully..... even if you say so, Haruha has already grown so big. She would probably reach our age in merely half a year"

"About that—"

Payakino's words were cut.

Who knows when she showed up, Haruha was clinging onto Payakino's arm. From the looks of it, Mifa was putting away the trump cards back into the item box, and taking out a cursed music box she recently got in exchange.

"Hey, Payakino-san..."

Clamp who had his eyes taken by the sight of Mifa letting out a sigh with downcast eyes, missed Haruha's words to Payakino.

And thus, he began to regret missing it later—

“How long will Haruha be able to be with daddy and mommy?”



Biiiiii—

—iii.

The electronic's noise reminiscent the buzz of insects that vibrated throughout the room.

In a certain apartment, the corner of the dimly lit room was filled with trash and had soon surpassed the furniture.

The item that was making the noise, belong to a device worn by the man, the owner of the house.

It was the terminal-Ramiel, used to play 『Cradle to The Glaive』. The message “Malfunction” was displayed repeatedly on the semi-transparent surface of the visor.

The error sound would absolutely not stop. However the man did not react to the sound ringing right next to his ear.

He just loosely folded his back on the chair and let the foam on the edge of his mouth to accumulates and fall.

Biiiiiii—

The electronic buzzing continued to vibrate inside the small room. And the man's body in the middle was similar to maggots on a pile of dead meat.

Forever and always.....

This man was then found fainting in the middle of playing an online game and

was taken to the hospital by a family member who had discovered him. It was reported on news the day after. However, there were no eyewitnesses at the moment of his death.

In real life he had a clear face with no beard at all, but his appearance in the game was completely different.

That was why no one would know that he was the robber at the train at Gunman's Grave who had his throat slashed by a certain girl.

Chapter 2: Output

A week after Haruha got caught up in the robbery and kidnapping incident by Paya the Kid.

Kasugai Yuu lacked sleep.

Surviving school while half asleep, he was finally returning home. Walking through the residential area under the early summer sunset, he lets out a yawn with his throat trembling resulting in tears coming out of his eyes.

“That game again? I’m amazed that you can continue without getting tired of it”

The one who said that in an amazed voice was Fuyufu, who walked by his side. Since their houses are in the same residential area and she didn’t have any club, they occasionally return home together like this.

“It’s a good game”

Yuu answered with a downcast face. Although Fuyufu was no longer watching his face, he did that to hide his facial expression.

“Well... of course, since it’s “your game”. But, just be careful. News about people fainting in their houses due to unknown reasons are spreading.”

Once she said that, he remembered Kouta saying the same thing as well. He said, “This is happening throughout Japan, which is bad. Actually I have low blood pressure, I hope I’m okay.” But Yuu doesn't remember much because of his drowsiness at the time.

But, the parting words left by Fuyufu, under the sunset sounded strangely sharp— which like always— unearths pain to Yuu.

“You’re Yuubocchi, a loner after all, you will die”

(Don’t say stuff like die....)

Fuyufu making him depressed through her words is a usual occurrence, but more so with today's emphasis on the word die. This is due to the fact that the word reminded him why he lacked sleep and how his anxiety began.

The reason he lacked sleep was Mifa.

Since five days ago, Mifa did not appear in『CtG』for some reason. Every day was then spent to comfort the lonely Haruha.

(What happened...?)

If it was only a day or two, it just might have been that the net-café she frequented was undergoing maintenance, however it passed a timeframe which made him worry. The last time she was seen, she acted like her usual self and played with Haruha like any other day, and it didn't seem like she got tired of the game or anything.

The only logical conclusion was that something must have happened in her private life.

(Could it be that she's sick...? Maybe bedridden right now?)

It could be something worse than a cold or it could be related to the fainting incidents Fuyufu was talking about... and with that thought in mind, his worries worsened which led to even more negative thoughts. Thinking about it won't help.

It is a common case in the online community. A person disappears without saying anything and there is no method of learning about their circumstances. The problem was that Mifa, whom he plays with, was just not a simple acquaintance. But if he were to describe their relationship— it was far too complicated to say.

“Come to think of it, I've been meeting with her nearly every day ever since I met her...”

It was about time he arrives home. More often than not, once Yuu reaches home, he usually greets Haruha and then.

“Will Mifa show up today?”

“I'm here daddy!”

He felt something strange when he saw a light grey van parked nearby.

People who come to Yuu's house are usually those from the postal delivery or courier service, or someone from his father's side of the family. But their family car is red, and they would normally give an advance notice before coming. There was no new message whatsoever on his mobile terminal when he checked.

The sliding door of the van opens, and a little girl jumps out from it— "I'm here daddy!"

Without even the need to hear her words, he already knew the girl's name.

"Haru...ha...?"

It was Haruha. Even though her hair color was a bit lighter and the clothes she's wearing was similar to those worn by elementary school children, she was undoubtedly Clamp's daughter.

Her dazzling smile overflowed his whole body. The little girl nodded with all her might.

"Yes, I'm Haruha"

....

Aaah, a dream.

Well who can blame him for thinking that? This happened right in front of Yuu's house, not inside the hotel in『CtG』which Clamp frequently visits. Even more, Haruha who is a resident of 『CtG』, a virtual world, is here in the real world.

Speechless, Yuu was about to place his hand on his forehead, when suddenly Haruha inquired.

"Daddy is daddy right?"

"Errrr. Yeah. That's right"

"As I thought. You look a bit different, but Haruha knew immediately!"

Nodding with a triumphant look on her face, Haruha clung onto Yuu's pants. The sensation felt was slightly more awkward as compared to when she did it in 『CtG』.

But it was undoubtedly done by the spoiled hugging mole Haruha.

“...Haruha. Emm, how... did you come here?”

He curiously asked while subconsciously stroking Haruha’s head. Haruha innocently enjoyed the sensation and narrowed her eyes while letting out the sound “nfufufu” with her throat.

“Nn? Haruha doesn’t really know”

“...Is that so. That... is quite troublesome”

“Let us explain about that matter.”

The voice came from the car from which Haruha appeared from. Looking into the car, there were three unfamiliar faces. They exited from the car in order and lined up in front of Yuu.

Two of them wore suits, a man and a woman.

The man was around his thirties. He wore round elongated sunglasses. Combined with a dry all-black attire, he was emitting an aura that didn’t match a person with a respectable occupation.

Meanwhile the woman looked young. She appeared to be around her twenties but also had an air of someone resembling her teens. With long casually tied hair and a smile that reflected her intelligence, she can be classified as the “woman secretary” type.

And the last among the three was a girl. Unlike Haruha, she was not a child. She appeared to be of around the same age as Yuu, wearing a sailor uniform with a face of a diligent girl. In contrast with the composed pair of adults in suits, her tension could be clearly seen with the way she was standing.

Looking further, she undoubtedly was a stranger. But there was a feeling of familiarity, which unlike with Haruha, came about due to déjà vu. A feeling which he could not shake off easily.

“Could it be...”

He stared at the girl consciously. Even as the girl’s pupils were shaking like a punching bag, she returned his gaze with upturned eyes. While Yuu felt that doing so was indecent, he continued to stare at the girl.

“The person...is Mifa?”

Unlike Haruha, her face was not exactly the same as in the game. Although she has an appearance of a respectable and diligent individual, however unlike the Mifa in-game, she had too much of a plain and mature image. But what convinced Yuu was that her age and height appeared to be the same and above all, Haruha appeared here. It was those two reasons.

The girl looked away without answering.

Eh, I was wrong? If so, then could it be that my question was upsetting? Thinking like that, Yuu got depressed, however an answer came from the person below.

“That’s right! She’s mommy!”

Haruha answered, which then prompted Yuu to switch his gaze back towards the girl. With her clumsy steps, Haruha, who was about to tumble, was caught by the girl. Gently but surely.

—It’s Mifa. No doubt about it.

Even with confidence of their identities, it actually left Yuu even more confused. These two girls, whom he met almost every day in 『CtG』 for the past few months, were somehow present in front of his home in real life. Furthermore, one of them is his virtual daughter, which of course shouldn’t exist outside of the game.



Naturally everyone's gaze turned towards the man in sunglasses who opted to explain the situation.

The man let out a grin which certainly left a terrible impression.

"Well talking while standing is tiring. May we continue this talk inside your house?"

Yuu then led everyone to the living room which was often his sanctuary to connect to『CtG』

Feel free to sit wherever you like, he said, and the three of them sat in front of the table. Excluding the sofa, the number of cushions were barely enough for everyone so they had to line up in an orderly manner.

Along with Haruha who was clinging to him, he brought out iced tea from the refrigerator. Bringing out enough cups for everyone, he then returned to the living room.

"I'm sorry, this is all that I have here."

With the nuances and formalities of "You don't have to bother drinking it." Yuu then placed the tray on the table. The woman in-black then raised her waist and poured the tea into the cups and handed them out to everyone. Meanwhile, Haruha rested herself on Mifa's knees.

First, let us settle the main matter—the guy with the sunglasses stood up.

"Well then, we will introduce ourselves. My name is Niiro Mansei. I am part of the Yashiko Ministry Subsidiary Organization... well, as an underling, to set things straight."

As he introduced himself, he presented his business card. On the upper left corner of the card, beside the organization name, it was written there "Human Equilibrium Institute" along with "The seventh senior researcher Niiro Mansei" which undoubtedly was suspicious. And there was also the fact that he didn't take off his sunglasses even inside the room. Was that a new trend?

"Next is... this woman, she's your mother's acquaintance."

While she was being stared at, the woman in-black let out a smile.

"Pleasant to meet you, Kasugai Yuu-kun. My name is Haijme Hidari"

“What do you mean by my mom’s... mother’s acquaintance?”

“I am involved with the Imagine Ekphrasis『Cradle to the Glaive』development. But I was just temporarily transferred from the institute so I am not exactly a full-time employee. And I’ve been indebted a lot by chief Kasugai.”

What was then the relationship between this human-something institute and the game company? Although the urge to ask such question was undoubtedly strong, he wasn’t able to ask it directly.

For now, he wanted to hear an explanation about a certain “problem” he had always thought of all this time.

Yuu’s gaze turned to this girl. She’s “Mifa”, the girl who has Haruha on her knees.

Once again their eyes met. She seemed to have been watching him for quite a while. But the moment their eyes met, she quickly averted them as well.

Unable to speak for herself, she had Hajime introduce her.

“Her name is Kugimiya Miharu-san. She’s in her first year of high school just like you. And, just as you expected, she’s the girl who played the character named “Mifa in『CtG』.”

“a... nice to meet you, I’m Kugimiya”

When she finally spoke, Miharu quickly covered her face under Haruha’s hair. Looking at her, one can quickly note that she’s pretty shy, especially in front of strangers. It boggles the mind to think that she’s the same person as that Mifa, who talked to Yuu so bluntly when they first met.

“My name is K-Kasugai Yuu...!”

But it was not just her. Yuu stiffened up due to the tension.

Why was he so nervous? To put it simply and of course with Fuyufu’s interpretation, he’s a loner. Honestly speaking, he was sociable enough for a normal high school student. He could crack some light jokes with girls from his class, at the very least.

The reason why he was so nervous might have been due to the fact that Mifa, whom he 《Married》, was on the other side or maybe because Miharu’s

appearance was breath-taking, or just maybe because the thought of Fuyufu staring deeply at him was floating on his mind.

But before Yuu was able to pinpoint the source of his nervousness, another “problem” raised her hand cheerfully.

“Haruha is... Haruha?”

“Why are you not convinced?”

This time, he was able to answer back normally. Straightforwardly, Haruha let out an “ehehe” laugh like she usually does. She had to politely speak because of the pair of adults present and due to her wanting imitate Miharu’s manner of speaking.

After a feeling of relief, Yuu directed his gaze towards Niiro so could ask questions.

“Stuff about Kugimiya-san and Haruha... you will explain it right? And also the reason why you all came here.”

Niiro smiled and laughed. As serious as he was, only his mouth was smiling.

“That’s for certain. Well then, I will talk first about Kasugai-kun’s cute little girl Haruha. We still haven’t talked about the details to Kugimiya-san as well.”

Miharu nodded seriously.

“To sum it up, Haruha-san is a person born in the world of 『Cradle to the Glaive』and came to this world.

...What the heck was the old man saying? He thought, however Yuu was not a Yuubocchi so he understood the roundabout explanation.

“...No, no. No way, that...”

“Hmm, I wonder how to explain this.”

Responding to Niiro’s gaze, Hajime took out a notebook from her breast pocket. She then ripped off a page to write something quickly on it.

“Listen, Yuu-kun. Imagine it first.

The build engine used to make the world of 『CtG』creates an endless realistic virtual world. It is arranged as a game under the system’s control but once that

“control” is taken off, it would be able to perfectly produce the authenticity of the real world.”

Real World ● ⇌ ○ CtG

“Did you keep up at this stage?”

It was a well-known fact, he nodded. Hajime smiled and wrote “OK” on the paper.

“Well then, in order to go into 『CtG』, players would have to create an elaborate avatar. An avatar that has an equal or greater bodily function compared to their own.”

Real World ● ⇌ ○ CtG OK

Player ■ → □ Avatar

“That’s right. There is a function to cut off pain and appetite, but there is an option to have it matched to your real body as well... my Mother once said”

“Yes, exactly. Then, this is OK as well.”

Hajime nodded in satisfaction and wrote the third line on the paper.

“As you can see—naturally this situation can also occur.”

Real World ● ⇌ ○ CtG OK

Player ■ → □ Avatar OK!

Human ◆ ← ◇ Avatar OK!! ←It’s here now!

.....?

.....Nnn? Eh?

Does it really work... like that?

If human and player characters were considered as equals then an NPC (Non-Player Character) would have the possibility of becoming a human in the real world. Yeah. It’s logical in a way...

.....

Nononononono.

Because the logical was so simple, he was almost convinced by it however it was such a long stretch. And to begin with,

“Then what about the body? In any case when a human goes into their avatar, their body is prepared on the other side, but not the other way around. It’s impossible.”

“It’s not that hard to create actual human flesh you know.”

He said so easily. Taken aback, Yuu glanced at Niiro. He was not even smiling, it was that terrifying. It seemed that it was common sense for them.

It was true that news about how medically creating cells has been advancing and spreading in recent years which might have implications in the future that allows people in the future to breed by reproducing and splitting somatic cells. Emphasizing “in the future”, Yuu never heard of stories or even gossip about people succeeding in creating an artificial human body before.

“.....It’s news to me.”

“Yeah, of course, revealing this to the public will incite critics and harsh inquiries. Well, what is important now is that “we can at least prepare a human body” as you can see.”

It was of course an unbelievable tale, but the very presence of Haruha confirms this. No matter what... no matter what, he couldn’t see that the little girl present was fake.

Before he was able to sort out his thoughts, Hajime resumed the talk.

“But, even if we are able to create a body, the “heart” would not be present. And eventually, we formed a partnership with Imagine Ekphrasis, which led to the current project.”

“Project?”

“Yes. The government will be the funder and investor for the new Imagine Ekphrasis generation game development, which on our end, will also lend stuff like computing infrastructures as well. In exchange, we can use their game world to study 『the way to create a new human』— so far that’s our plan.”

And then— Hajime and Niiro’s gaze turned to Haruha. Haruha, on Miharu’s

lap, received their stares and somehow still managed to wave at them. She probably didn't mean anything by that.

“And the first success sample is Haruha. An Artificial Child created in 『CtG』 whose mind was transferred to a human body and now is here with us in the real world. That’s her.”

“But I heard that computers didn't have the capability to create human consciousness...”

Yuu rebutted as he recalled the conversation he had with Fuyufu in the past. The mixed feelings of being unable to believe and not wanting to reject Haruha’s existence stole the strength from his throat.

In response, Hajime answers with a smile. At the corner of her eyes, there was an uplifting expression which she showed for the very first time.

“The Nephilim type computer used in 『CtG』 is completely different as compared to any existing ones. It is one of those machines that has the capability to create infinite possibilities and to create a human from within.”

“I don’t really understand, but... why are you entrusting such amazing stuff to a game company?”

“In order to have this system operate with utmost secrecy, we had no choice but to have Imagine Ekphrasis, which is the largest national net game manufacturer, possess it. Under what circumstance that led to this, unfortunately we cannot answer it now.”

A computer that can only be operated by a game company...what?

There were still lots of questions that remained but before he was able to spit it out, he understood that it would have just been a waste of time. There was no other choice but to believe what they said for the time being and continue on with the conversation.

“Then why do you want us... Clamp and Mifa, to take care of Haruha?”

With all the facts that were presented, in a way it can be said that this was the most absurd doubt he had, and Niiro answered it instantly.

“We tried various ways to create a Hadzar... a new mankind as you can call it,

and as one of our attempts, a plan was proposed to create the mind of a baby on its fresh state, pick up the best-fit and suitable couple with the computer, and entrust the baby to them and have them raise it. Technically we could have created her in the adult form right away but the artificially synthesized personality she has is... a bit poor.”

His explanation was subtly convincing, and at the same time it wasn't. The issue itself was just too vague and Yuu couldn't come up with anything to respond to it. Finally, the last question was asked.

“Then..... what do you want us to do with Haruha?”

“Anyhow, the same as before.”

Niirō easily answered back but Yuu couldn't understand what he meant.

“Same as before, you mean... Haruha will return back inside the game?”

“No. Based on the various databases we had, it's believed that the personality created in 『CtG』 in the state of a teen is still relatively unstable, unable to fully adapt to the real world. Hence from now on we will have Haruha live in the real world as a human here alongside the two of you.”

.....

It took a while

For him to understand.

Haruha would live as a normal human from now on. This left an unsettling feeling but he had no reason to object.

In here—he meant in the Kasugai household.

You—he meant with Yuu, naturally that would have happened if she stays in the Kasugai household.

And the two of you—that would mean, probably.....

“W-W-What do you mean!?”

Miharu shouted as soon as she understood the scenario. Her voice was so loud that it echoed throughout the house, and at the same time it was a refined rick voice. Just a little while ago, she only uttered faint sounds which were as quiet as a mosquito. Niiro and Hajime were unsurprisingly shocked as well.

“I-I-I was surprised..... seeing Haruha here in the real world, and then you people suddenly show up saying that you will provide her a place to stay so that’s why I came along the way here.....”

Yuu then saw that her mouth was trembling. Her face vividly red.

“IT’S IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO LIVE WITH A GUY!”

It was subtly shocking, being said so frankly.

“Please wait a second. Even I’m troubled being asked to do so suddenly”

Yuu was in his impressionable age. Simply put, it was just too absurd of a request.

To suddenly live together with a girl of his age and also..... with Haruha who was born from a game, just how the heck was he supposed to live with them?

“First of all, how did it become like this?”

Niiro answered the question frankly.

His answer, in contrary to the oddities of topic, was very sensible.

“Isn't it normal for family members to live together? Especially when the child

is still so young.”

“Kugh.....”

It was the final blow for Yuu. He had no right to object.

Yuu turned his gaze towards Haruha. The child, who was born from the game, appeared to be completely clueless, returned his gaze with a blank look. Her pupils’ were— like a mirror.

“After countless number of failures, Haruha is a child who finally obtained a human body. Her personality, information or data, is impossible to reproduce. We wish to cherish her as well. And for that, we think that it’s best to provide her with the most familiar environment from the game. And the most important factor of her life is the two of you, her 『Parents』”

He couldn't say anything against that argument. Not to brag, but Haruha was yearning for Clamp and Mifa wholeheartedly. Was it really okay to betray her feelings?

“Fortunately, we didn't have to provide a new house since the Kasugai household has a lot of vacant rooms and it’s quite far from the neighborhood. And since it’s the house of a developer, it has all equipment required to use 『CtG』.

That’s why we wish for all of you to live here together. Can you understand that?”

“But that.....”

Miharu who let out a loud voice earlier lowered her head. No wonder. She appears to be an extremely shy girl, to live together with a person of the opposite sex she just met today, was out of the question.

But.

“.....I got it. I, don’t mind”

Yuu voiced his acceptance. Niiro probably examined what relationship Yuu had with his mother and used that to his favor. If you had to call it despicable, it’s despicable indeed, but more than that, his pride of not wanting to run away worn him out.

“That part of you, you must have inherited that from your mother”

“Because of that I ended up playing a game filled with bugs though”

Hajime was just flattering him—he simply thought—and he coldly replied. In fact, the game his mother made so far had large amounts of bugs in exchange for an abnormal degree of freedom it provides. There were also some internet urban legends that said that several debuggers were sent to the hospital because of it, but as a matter of fact, Yuu knows that many of the staffs collapsed in the middle of debugging the previous installments of 『CtG』.

Ultimately, there were also some that collapsed and never woke up..... with that in mind, he turned and faced Miharuru.

“.....But Kugimiya-san, you don't have to force yourself. Your family won't allow that right?”

He tried his best to be as gentle as possible, but Miharuru's shoulders trembled in shock.

And then everyone's gaze faced Miharuru. Since Yuu, the master of the house—but to be exact, it is managed by his uncle—had accepted, everything depended entirely on her answer.

Haruha, who didn't understand the conversation at all, turned her body happily on Miharuru's lap. Yuu didn't see her face, but he could easily guess the expression she made. It was that. That clingy upturned eyes she shows when Miharuru was about to log out from 『CtG』.

“Won't Mommy want to be with us?”

Miharuru abruptly turned her head away, after Haruha hugged her chest tightly.

.....

.....Looking at it now he noticed that Miharuru's breasts are bigger than “Mifa's” and it didn't seemed as if his eyes were fooling him or whatever, but normally won't girls usually enhance part of their bodies when creating an Avatar (provisional figure) but it might just be his selfish assumption.

“Eh? Mommy, your boobs are bigger than the usual.”

.....Yup, it was just a false assumption. Thanks to Haruha's chattering, he was

able to break free from the infinite chain of delusion based on pre-notions. Once again, thanks Haruha.

Attaining new wisdom, Yuu's eyes started to sparkle—which had warmth—and that gaze was quickly spotted by Miharu.

It was enough to have her almost crying face flushed even more, but her lips started to tremble as well.

“a.....”

If this was a manga, this would be the scene where cold sweat starts to flow out, but for starters, he would be able to recognize that he felt a chill on his spine.

“No, that, I mean, this is just a misunderstanding—”

It turned bad at this rate. As Haruha's beloved daddy, he couldn't let Miharu scorn him.....well, it'd be awkward. As a normal high school boy, Yuu has something that resides in the center of his body, known as a beast shouting the word “love”, and it would do various things regardless of his will, which he needed Miharu to understand.....no, impossible. Yup, impossible indeed.

Yuu was frustrated, unable to express anything, not even an unsightly excuse, but the words Miharu said next, was beyond his expectations.

“I-I will live with Haruha too!”

“Ee? Are... are you sure?”

Not only did she appear to be forcing herself, she also said that right after Yuu's disgraceful behavior, her action was unmistakably a strange one.

However, with Miharu's next words, the wall of misunderstanding was taken down in one fell swoop.

“Because I cannot let Haruha live together with Kasugai-kun! Friends from my school said that men are lascivious beasts screaming “love” from the center of their body all year long! It will surely be a bad influence to this girl!”

Saying all that she wanted, she held Haruha tightly, then glared fiercely at Yuu. That stare of her was honed as sharp as an owl, letting out an aggressive aura of distrust.

“Well~, it seems you have made up your mind.”

“I’m glad it was solved quicker than I thought.”

“Haruha.....Mommy will protect you, alright?”

“Mommy, it’s a little painful.....”

In the lively living room, the visitors started commenting what they had in mind.

Yuu felt like crying a little.

After that, they began talking in detail about the “life” they will have after this. What they've discussed were as follows.

First, Haruha and Miharu's living expenses will be covered by Niiro and his people, to the extent of them not having any inconvenience. It counts as part reward and payment for participating in the program, so they don't need to hold back on anything.

First, while Yuu and Miharu were at school, Hajime will be present in the Kasugai household to care for Haruha.

Next, Yuu is Haruha’s father and Miharu is Haruha’s mother, but even so both of them are mere strangers, so please discern to what is known as “moderation.” (Miharu’s demand)

And lastly.

“Lastly, for the sake of having Haruha to live in the house, we must give her a Japanese name.”

“How about this?”

Hajime took the memo sheet from before and wrote the name on the other side of it.

『Kasugai Haruha (春日井 春羽) 』

Yuu and Miharu, and then Haruha peeked at the paper and looked at each other.

“I think it’s good. It matches her image.....What do you think, Kugimiya-san?”

Yuu wondered a bit if, she was going to say something like “I don’t like it! using Yuu’s last name!” however,

“I think it’s good too, it sounds cute and nice.”

She liked it. He felt relieved, especially because there was a foul atmosphere a while ago.

“This is Haruha? Is it cute?”

Meanwhile Haruha herself didn't understand it. Much less the word “Wing”, Haruha who didn't have an idea of what seasons are, was unable to see the word “Spring” as anything other than a symbol.

Yuu was wondering how to explain it to her, but without thinking so hard, Miharuru talked to the “daughter” while embracing her.

“This “Spring” you see, is something warm, soft and pink colored, just like Haruha. I will teach you about it eventually.”

.....When talking to Yuu, her attitude was so cold and hard which shook his beliefs, but Miharuru’s expression when talking to Haruha was unmistakably Mifa’s.

Yuu somehow became a little happy.

It was the status quo filled with anxiety and embarrassment, but somehow he felt that this will turn out well—

“Nee, Mommy.”

While holding her stomach, Haruha looked at Miharuru. Miharuru’s face stiffened.

“W-what is it? Is your stomach in pain or something?”

“No. It feels cold.”

“Aa, that must be because she drank the tea earlier.”

Come to think about it, Haruha was still not accustomed to eating and drinking in her human body. There were senses in 『CtG』but not the sense of digestion—It was possible to eat food and drink but it will instantly disappear once it enters the stomach—,that’s why the sensation of “having something in the stomach” didn't exist.

“In here, when eating or drinking something will directly accumulate in your stomach. That’s why drinking something cold will make your stomach cold.”

“Hmmm..... but somehow my legs are tingling.”

“Legs?”

Behind Miharuru was showing a blank look, Hajime started to shout in a hurry.

“This is bad! That's maybe because, she wants to go to the toilet!”

It appears as if an angel passed.

Yuu and Miharuru held Haruha on both sides and rushed to the toilet.

And so, the girl named Kasugai Haruha arrived in the real world.

At the same time, Kasugai Yuu’s carefree and lonely single life came to an end.

And Kugimiya Miharuru’s gloomy daily life was noisily blown away as well.

The story of the most bizarre family in this world finally started.



“.....Now you are finally able to go to the toilet alone”

“Yes, I’ve mastered it!”

“Excellent. Then lastly wash your hands”

A training session is being held in the Kasugai household's absolutely normal toilet. After helping Haruha wear her skirt, Kugimiya Miharuru praised her.

“For the next time and after, go in by yourself okay”

After she said that, she once again looked around the toilet. She was a bit worried about the place where a boy lives by himself, but it’s surprisingly well taken care of and she was able to use it without hesitating.

(In game he’s a person of logic, could it be that he is a meticulous person?)

While thinking that, she let go of her hand from Haruha’s and opened the toilet door. And— right outside, Kasugai Yuu is waiting. *Gulp* as if something is

stuck in his throat.

Involuntarily, she observed him from the head to the tip of his feet.

He doesn't appear to be a boy with any special features on him. It might be because he is wearing a school uniform, but he's not the type of person who wears any accessories or anything to begin with. His form (Clamp) in 『CtG』 where you can easily change appearances, excluding gender and height, he doesn't have that much differences compared to his real self.

“.....What?”

It can't be helped, but the voice she tried so hard to speak with was really stiff.

“Well, I was wondering do you know how to you it ... you see...”

In contrary, Yuu let out a troubled voice. This part of him is different from when in the game. He's shaking from waist down, something completely unthinkable coming from the always calm and composed 'Clamp of Scarabaeus'.

“It's fine. It appears to be from the same maker used in my house”

“Haruha has mastered it too! Since its embarrassing if Haruha still don't know 『Pee』 and 『Toilet』 after all!”

Haruha's innocence when she happily reported to her “daddy” makes Miharu's head hurts. She knows that it can't be helped, but should she teach her to be embarrassed first.....?

And her eyes met Yuu's who was thinking the same thing. He is Haruha's “father”, and also the man she first met.

“.....Kuh.....”

Diverting her eyes, she looks towards the living room. Then she realized.

“Eh? Where is Niiro-san and Hajime-san?”

“Saying that they have some paper work to do they hurriedly left. Hajime said she will return at night though”

“They left us with Haruha that soon!? What will happen if she got sick and—”

“Well. The thing on Haruha's neck..... a choker? They said they monitor her health condition through it. And they have other people from the institute on

standby in case of an emergency as well”

“I-Is that so. Well if that is the case.....”

The conversation stops there.

They don't know what to talk about. Even though in game they are close friends who often talk about stuff like how to raise Haruha and often had light quarrels when deciding the destination they are going to.

Even so, the person in front of her is undoubtedly a stranger. And probably the same goes for him.

Furthermore, this stranger is a man.

Since she was originally a shy person, under her mother's policy, Miharu was enrolled to an all-girls school and for this several months Miharu hardly interacts with men of his age in real life. In middle school she had the opportunity to talk with men, but recalling back the conversations she had were mostly for business and formal matters.

Just, how to deal with this somewhat hard and stiff creature? She agreed to live here under the momentum she had a little while ago, but it seems that she should've been a little more cautious about it.

“? What is it, mommy daddy?”

“Ah, I was just thinking what we should do from now on.”

The scene where Miharu gently pats the confused Haruha looks familiar. It was the scene he has grown accustomed to within the past two months. Just a little his nervousness lessens. Even though it's just a little.

“.....Aa, that's right. Haruha, do you want to watch TV?”

“Teevee?”

Haruha's eyes turned round.

After that, the round eyes of hers, became captivated by the TV.

The first thing that showed up was a broadcast of a news program of street interviews in a major city. Surprisingly or not, it did not impress Haruha much. In 『CtG』, that kind of scenery is not nil after all.

But then, the anime that shows up after that instantly caught her attention.

The proud and hugely popular show for girls from kindergarten to teenagers, a magical girl anime 『Revive! Mystical Priest Girl Rasupu-chan 5』. The original 『Mystical Priest Girl Rasupu-chan』 is a classic girl anime that has aired for over 15 years, when she was little, Miharu also often watched the series.

The setting for each characters changes every year, but the important established atmosphere never changes. Ah that's right, there was that moment where Rasupu-chan seduced a handsome male guest character with Shiberia Magic, but then he was stolen by a love rival and then they had a magic battle to fight for him, and after that they reconciled under the sunset by the riverside..... even though Rasupu-chan already has a boyfriend.

Like that, while looking at the screen over Haruha's shoulder, Miharu was immersed in nostalgic feelings.

“When I was little, I was as innocently passionate with this, just like Haruha right now”

“Eh.....? This is innocent? Lastly the boyfriend Rasupu-chan kept came to pick her up at the riverside saying 『L-Let's go home. I-I made delicious borsht. Okay?』it was somewhat swelling my heart, it made me cry a bit.....”

Yuu, who also watching somehow pulled out a painful face. That was supposedly the sweet part, but he doesn't understand girls' subtleties at all.

“By the way..... is it fine if you don't go home, Kugimiya-san?”

“Am I a bother?”

She unintentionally let out a worried voice, and Yuu quickly denied it in a hurry.

“N-No! I don't mean that. I just wondered if your parents will get worried. Even though you said okay, you will still need preparations right? Like a change of clothes..... and such”

“Then no problem”

Miharu then exits to the hallway and returns to the room along with the luggage that she left at the corner.

“Guitar case?”

She placed the oversized guitar case in front of the confused Yuu. It has a quite old dull brownish-yellow color, the metal part of it still seems to be fine, but the corners are already worn-out and the fibers are exposed.

“The insides do not contain a guitar. I put my clothes and personal belongings in here”

Although she wasn't being suspected, she still opened the lid to show the insides.

Inside contains a mobile terminal, charger, Ramiel (『CtG』 terminal), dairies, laptop, detective novels, and a toothpaste set wrapped with clothes and a towel as replacement of the cushion.

And somehow inside, her underwear that she folded randomly are put on plain sight.

SLAM!

The lid was closed at near lightning speed, and instantly blew wind to his face.

“Ee, errmm....”

“Please..... don't, say anything.....!”

Yuu was probably trying to give some kind of follow up but he was stopped by Miharu. Naturally this time, Yuu isn't the one at fault, but being comforted by him will just makes her feel miserable.

(.....I was planning to show him my good side, but I made a mistake instead..... as I thought, living together with a boy might be impossible)

The feelings of shame and self-loathing made her go silent.

“Well..... but, why do you put your stuff inside a guitar case?”

Luckily she still has energy to respond to Yuu who kindly changed the topic for her.

“.....Because it was sudden, I could not get a proper bag when leaving the house. Then I found this in the storeroom”

“I see. So Kugimiya-san got taken by Niiro and his man too”

“No—”

Miharu hesitated. It's not something that could be easily said to a stranger. It might change the way he sees her right now.

However, she cannot afford to keep secrets from the resident of the house she will be living in. As a matter of fact, it's related to the situation they're having right now.

That's why Miharu honestly told her current situation.

“Actually, I ran away from home not long ago”

Because they didn't have time and energy to prepare food, they got dinner through the neighboring family restaurant's delivery service.

Unexpectedly, Haruha was okay in eating anything. She's fine with most vegetables. But somehow she ended up leaving the asparagus, well that part might just be her preference. At least they won't have to worry about food from now on.

However, her eating manner doesn't go so well, she cannot handle a fork and spoon well and would often spill her food. Her clothes ended up having sauce stains.

Miharu who take care of Haruha from the side appeared to be a little troubled.

Although she was very skillful in game, the same could not be said in here. Compared to a normal elementary school student, her movement is like that of a robot. Because of that,

“Ouh!” —*Crash*

Somehow along with a shout, with the fork she was holding, she hit an iced tea cup and spilled it. Although Haruha herself was safe, along with Miharu both of them were soaked wet. Yuu quickly went to the washroom in a hurry. He was probably looking for a towel or something.

Haruha, with blank eyes, looks at Miharu who was standing next to her and spreading the light sweet smell of straight tea^[18].

“Eh? Mommy is under 《Wet Status》. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine but..... my clothes are soaked”

She’s all wet from her shirt down to her skirt, the muddy feeling on her lower chest feels disgusting. Fortunately or not, she didn’t take off her water-repellent sailor uniform.

“It will get pretty in three minutes”

Haruha was trying to cheer her up by telling her about the rule of 《Wet Status》 in 『CtG』, in response Miharu let out a troubled laugh and stands up.

“Ahaha..... In here (reality), we must wash this before it becomes a stain”

She spreads the folds of her skirt, took out a paper napkin and let it absorb the tea. I wonder does this goes under normal laundry..... while thinking that and raising her head, her eyes met with Yuu who just returned from the washroom.

While holding a brand new towel, he shows an expression of being taken aback as if seeing something unbelievable. Wondering what he saw, Miharu looked at her own appearance— her hand that was holding the hem of her skirt quickly stops. She stopped. And froze like a stone.



Realizing that the part of her Y-shirt that got stained by the tea became transparent she stiffly stopped moving, her body convulsed into spasms, and her face turned red as if stained by blood.

While both Miharuru and Yuu were unsure of the next following behavior each other will make, the culprit of the entire thing Haruha stood up. She looked up at Miharuru's body from below, and then stretched out her small hands, and *puff*, *puff* hit Miharuru's breast with it and excitedly reports.

"Mommy, as expected, Mommy's boobs are bigger in here compared to there (game)!"

Yuu just silently saw off Miharuru take the change of clothes and went to the washroom. Later he hears a wallow scream from the other side of the door, but Yuu understands her feelings and just let it be.

Shortly after, the figure of Miharuru wearing a gym uniform — because it appears to be "a clothes that is fine dirty" — returned to the table. She didn't try to look at Yuu's face directly, but with a very quiet voice she said "Thank you very much for the towel".

Haruha was eating right beside Yuu while Miharuru was not present, but when she returned Haruha instantly went to her side. It felt a bit lonely, but in game Mifa was more actively taking care of Haruha so it can't be helped.

And Miharuru herself, even though being ashamed like that, she unconsciously took care of Haruha's sticky mouth that was busy munching on the food.

—Kugimiya Miharuru. Without any ulterior motive, she's a good kid, maybe.

She was a bit harsh towards Yuu, but rather than because of Yuu himself, it's more like her vigilance towards males in general. He begins to think of her as a kind and diligent girl. The gap between her personality and Mifa (Avatar)'s was quite confusing, but it is just another case of a quiet person suddenly becoming bold on the net, such a typical story.

By why is such a kid, running away from home? Even though she went as far as to tell that she's running away from home she still hasn't told Yuu anything in detail.

—A “daughter” who came from inside a game and her “mother” a diligent-looking girl who ran away from home.

(Two women with various circumstances, both are harboring in my house. Quite hard-boiled..... I would like to say but it feels something is missing)

Leaving that worthless delusion inside his head, Yuu rests his chin with his hand. And then, he throws the fried egg hamburger into his mouth. It was soft-boiled.

“May I use the bath? And if possible, the washing machine too”

“Eh..... yeah, of course”

After than exchange, Miharuru and Haruha entered the bathroom prepared by Yuu.

Haruha who doesn't understand the concept of a bath — After all, inside the game, no matter how dirty you become it will get clean in a mere three minutes — raised a question “By bath you mean that? The thing with Goemon-san?” eagerly with her eyes, in cases like this it's better to let her experience it head first so Miharuru went in with her.

Right before they closed the sliding door in the dressing room, Miharuru said with the sharpest eyes she ever showed.

“.....If you dare to peek, I'll drag Haruha away and leave this house immediately”

“Really I won't”

The moment Yuu returned to the living room after he annoyingly replied so — His heart became hard to control.

Just now he realized that he's too late to notice this peculiar situation, of which a girl whom he first met is taking a bath in his house. By no other than Miharuru herself, their consciousness of each other is rapidly emerging.

While he sits on the sofa in the living room and randomly watches TV, he heard the sounds of “running water” from the bathroom. And mixed along with it was the cheerful voice of Haruha who's having fun, and occasionally the sound of Miharuru raising her voice.

It's that hugging mole Haruha after all; she probably tried to hug Miharuru in the bathroom and troubled her.

..... Yeah.This is awkward.

It's not like he had any desire to do anything blameworthy that would make Miharuru worry, but even so to be composed in this situation, is an entirely different case. Even Yuu, who was always playing 『CtG』 outside school, still has interest in the opposite sex like a normal guy would.

He thought he might as well wait in his room on the second floor until they finish taking their bath, but it will be inconvenient if anything were to happen in the bathroom and he could not deal with it as fast as possible.

While worrying endlessly on the sofa, Hajime Hidari returned.

“Hee, Haruha-chan already went to the bath huh. I should've bring her a change of clothes”

What Hajime, who just arrived in the living room, was wearing wasn't a suit from the afternoon, but a summer sweater and a skirt under a lab coat; it was questionable to say the least. Moreover she's wearing glasses she didn't wear back at the afternoon. Not only that, the atmosphere around her had completely changed judging from her gestures and way of speaking.

Being anxious by the older woman's sudden frank changes, Yuu decided to ask.

“I'm sorry..... could it be, it's bad to put her in water?”

Hajime lightly laugh and shook her hand.

“Of course not. I said it right? Haruha-chan is a human. She's made from very similar genes to ours and was composed of a similar composition, that's why her color, voice, taste, and smell are very familiar right?”

Certainly, whether it's eating or watching TV, Haruha was able to properly react to it. She did say that it feels tingling when eating pepper, it means that her tastes are pretty much that of a human.

“To put it in another way, just like a human, if her body is dirty and not washed it will be bad for her health. Ah, but for now don't leave her alone for most of the time, especially when walking on stairs or taking a bath.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Haruha’s mind still hasn't gotten used to that body. No matter how great a gamer is, it’s normal to be confused when playing a new game for the first time. For that kid, her body here (reality) is her avatar (incarnation). Her awareness to her own muscles and nerves are still not linked well yet.”

Indeed. So that was the reason why Haruha’s movement here felt so awkward compared when she’s in game. It might be close to the feeling of having to walk after spending long time bedridden at hospital.

“Well, she should be able to adjust after several months. She’s human after all”

The smile Hajime made after feeling assured was— very charming.

He averted his eyes for some reason as if to hide his embarrassment and to relieve his sense of discomfort he asked.

“..... Somehow Hajime-san’s personality changed from before”

“Well of course, I’ll have to put on a mask in front my boss. To put in other word, it’s a facade”

Hajime mischievously smiled and suddenly pressed her face close.

“If you have any request, I’ll put on any face you like”

“Eee.... eh....!? No, err—”

He unconsciously lost his balance and his breathing becomes rigid. It was suffocating.

But then, Hajime easily pulled back, and raises one finger with a straight face.

“Well a reaction from a high school student might be like that, but Yuu-kun is a papa, so I expect you to be more firm”

“I, I will keep that in mind.....”

Exhausted, he sat down on the sofa, and muttered weakly.

That’s right..... at any rate he is Haruha’s guardian, he should behave as one, both physically and mentally. While putting that determination he directs his gaze towards the bathroom.

And, there was...

Miharu who appears to be watching that conversation midway, and in contrary of her soft warm skin that just came out of the bath her eyes were very cold.

And then, next to her was Haruha wearing Miharu's one-piece shirt, delivering an innocent gaze and completely having no idea of the situation.

In that very moment, for the first time of his life, Kasugai Yuu felt a sudden impulse to commit suicide.

What Hajime brought for Haruha wasn't just a change of clothes.

It was Haruha's personal Ramiel (『CtG』 Terminal).

That was completely different from Yuu's. Miharu's was also different but it was beyond that.

When talking about normal Ramiel, regardless of its version, the specification is always that, of a visor that covers the upper half of the user's face. But this thing is a capsule about the size of a small bed. Unlike normal Ramiel you do not wear it to use it, but rather go inside the device, lie down, and close the top cover, it's reminiscent of some kind of medical equipment.

The word "Yotsura Artifactual Laboratory" and "Anthropic Code Transfer System" were printed on top of the eyeball-like red lens front cover. The "for HAL/Ha" at the end might be referring to Haruha's name.

In contrast to its appearance that seemed to be packed with lots of metal parts, it was quite light, but even so, it took the combined strength of Hajime, two researchers (maybe) she brought, and Yuu to lift it all the way to the corner of the living room. When it was finally over, Yuu and Hajime's shoulders were drenched from their sweat.

"Actually I must teach you how to use this by today but..... I'm tired so let's do it tomorrow"

Is it okay to be so loose, he thought but,

"And, the important Haruha-chan herself seems to be sleepy"

Come to think of it, Haruha who got bored waiting was now resting her small head above Miharu's lap.

Yuu and Miharu looked at each other.

It seems Haruha, who came out of the virtual world, can sleep too.

.....Well, like that Haruha happily started her first time sleeping, but...

This is problematic.

“.....”

“.....Zzzz~.....Nnyaa~.....”

“.....”

Within the dark room illuminated by the pale light of night-light.^[19]

Above Yuu's not so poor or gorgeous bed that he has used ever since elementary school.

Along with Haruha who lets out cat-like voices while sleeping in the middle, Yuu and Miharu were silently conscious about each other's presences.

To put it in another way, they cannot concentrate on sleeping because of the other person's breathing, motion, the close distance between them, and the rustling sound their clothes made when they move.

As it was early summer, they're using a towel blanket instead of a Futon^[20], so even though they “sleep on the same bed” it's ultimately not “sharing a bed”. But, besides Haruha who's a child, it's surely not a normal situation for two high school students of the opposite sex to be in.

Even though they carefully made sure not to see each other's eyes, the desire to see Haruha's sleeping face won, thus repeating the circle of accidentally seeing each other, averting their eyes in a hurry, and repeat. And to make it worse, the desire to do it again gets stronger each time.

Even their thoughts to peek through their half-open eyes were the same.

((Just why this happens.....!?!))

After Hajime and the others left, Yuu was planning to sleep in the living room

after taking a bath. As the only usable bed in the Kasugai household at the time was just the one in Yuu's room. There is also one in his mother's room, but it's in the same state before her death — which was buried under tons of books and documents — so it cannot be used unless they spent the whole day cleaning it.

.....Although, he planned to keep his mother's room as it is, so tomorrow maybe they will just order a bed or a futon, and clean up the spare room that's currently used as a storage room and use it.

Anyway, there's no way he would have Haruha and of course Miharuru as well to sleep on the sofa. For today the two girls shall sleep in Yuu's room instead, and he will do his best to delicately do the bedding for them.

On the other hand, Miharuru was regretful.

"I'm sorry. To have Kasugai-kun to sleep on the sofa and all....."

"It's fine. It's not like we can have Haruha to sleep by herself"

"But then Kasugai-kun will....."

But she cut her own words, because saying that would mean to show her distrust towards Yuu himself. And within such a subtle atmosphere.

"Nee, nee....."

The one who raised her voice while tightly hugging Yuu's leg was none other than their beloved princess Haruha. She's wearing the summer pajamas she received from Hajime, and now she was rubbing her own sleepy face. Her appearance was unduly cat-like.

Haruha who was puzzled by the sensation of being sleepy for the first time obediently listened to Miharuru's explanation "It's okay. To sleep is a very good thing" and loosened her mouth. Suddenly wanting to, Yuu stroke Haruha's head.

"Sorry to make you wait Haruha. The bed is ready, you can sleep now"

"Let's sleep together daddy"

Miharuru tried to talk to her out of it, but unexpectedly Haruha shook her head.

"Haruha wants to sleep with daddy too!"

The place.

Is frozen.

“N-No, no, that is a bit...”

“Tha, that’s right Haruha. We are, not like that, so things like that—”

In a hurry the two of them tried to answer^[21], but their words were unexpectedly broken.

On Haruha’s face, a certain emotion was shown within her drowsiness. Right below the shades of her eyes was the color of despair, the kind of feeling that a normal child shouldn’t have known.

“But..... 『Sleep』 is the thing where Haruha can’t see, feel, or understand anything right?

Daddy and mommy might..... disappears when sleeping”

—That’s right. Yuu and Miharu faced each other. For Haruha, to experience sleep is both fun but also an anxious thing. It’s different from Yuu and Miharu who accept it as a normal occurrence. Everything is the first time for her, the only thing she can unconditionally trust are just her daddy and mommy.

Once they’ve understood that, there was no option to refuse.

Thus, on the absolutely not wide bed they formed the word river^[22]

.....

An hour had passed since they turned off the light. There was Yuu lying right besides Haruha who was letting out a proper sleeping voice, but he couldn’t sleep at all. Even though he was so tired, he still hasn’t reached the entrance of sleep.

The reason was simple. Because he knew that Miharu is awake. Every one minute she would move slightly, and every thirty seconds she would let out a sigh. But even so it’s not like he could do anything about it, because his heart beats fast as he felt their body heat transmitted through the mat.

First of all, Miharu who appear to distrust man that much is lightly dressed. Since this is early summer, it can’t be helped that she gets hot, but why a tank top and short pants. Just by moving a little, that plump exposed legs of her

would enter his field of vision.

Maybe because she was in the middle of running away, thus she doesn't own any bulkier pajamas but..... seeing how low her guard is sure is worrisome.

(This is bad..... the more I think about sleeping the sleepier I get)

Like this, Haruha who had fallen asleep so peacefully sure is envious. The moment he glanced at her, Haruha rolled over and clung onto him.

“.....Nyu.....”

Not sure whether she's awake or not, maybe she's having a dream, while repeatedly moved her mouth she buried her face tightly into Yuu's chest.

The presumptuous petite angel who knocked his belly was just like a doll, but, the certain warmth she has was pretty hot. She's a human after all, recalls Hajime's words.

It's such a weird story. Even though they're all human, there was a man like Yuu, a woman like Miharu, and a kid like Haruha. Furthermore, even Yuu himself who had become like this, was once just like Haruha who's small, doll-like, and very dependent of her beloved parents.

.....It might be not much of a difference now. Yuu let out a bitter smile and stroked Haruha's hair. Haruha pulled her lips as if getting tickled.

“.....daddy.....”

Unconsciously, he hugged her back with all his might.

But, she will undoubtedly wake up from it so he put up with it. Although he cannot deny that he almost lost his composure seeing the skirt getting wet by Haruha's droll.

“.....Really, Haruha is really a hugging mole”

He tickled her ear with a whisper. Turning his eyes, there was Miharu smiling warmly at them,

Very naturally, he was able to return with a smile and low voice.

“Her first “sleeping together” partner is me”

Within the darkness, Miharu's feelings were transmitted clearly.

“.....But, she called 『mommy』 first so it’s me”

“That’s right. Within the bygone days maybe such a thing did happened”

Yuu who’s showing his composure for grasping tonight hegemony (?) in hand, and frowning Miharu. In such scene, Yuu felt a bit more assured.

“At first I thought your personality is completely different, but you’re like Mifa from times to times”

“Aa.....”

Suddenly Miharu was at a loss of words. It feels like she is regretting something.

It’s dark so it’s hard to see her expression. But, he was able to see her hesitatingly rubbing her legs together at the corner of his eyes.

“..... It’s really weird right. Being a Net Benkei^[23]”

“No. 『CtG』is an RPG after all, it’s normal to act”

“It’s a bit different from acting. I’m usually like this..... so I adore those who have a bright personality like Mifa. I can’t change even if I want to in front of a person in flesh, but I can when being Mifa in『CtG』. Unlike me who is just all talk, who is bad at talking and shy, who is bad at facing boys. And unlike me..... who can only listen to her parents”

Her voice was very small and vague, probably as to not wake Haruha up. Even so, thanks to the quietness of the room, and the close distant between them, he was able to clearly hear her voice.

He was able to hear what he failed to from before.

“And even so, you ran away from home?”

“.....I did say runaway but, all I do is just walking around staying at friends’ houses. Depending on which house they might’ve contacted my mother. My revolt is only that far”

“Is your house strict.....?”

“There are some special circumstances so my mother started to manage my life. I entered an all-girl school because my mother said so, and just a while ago,

she made me quit the chorus club in that high school because I came home late.”

.....So that’s why her time in『CtG』 increased. He feels pathetic to feel happy without knowing that. But setting that aside, the reason why her guard was so low was probably due to her being accustomed with an all-girl living style, he thought.

“And then, this time she told me to stop playing 『CtG』..... Well, it’s my fault to do an all-nighter and overslept though. But, at least just this, I don’t want to stop doing just because she told me so”

“.....Because Haruha is there right”

Miharu, even in this darkness, clearly and strongly nodded.

“That’s why I ran away taking a Ramiel with me..... but it’s not certain that there is a corresponding line in my friend's house, and even if there is one I would feel bad to borrow it. In the end, I couldn’t log-in in these few days”

This is just Yuu’s imagination but there is no way the reason “I have a child in game so there is no way I can stop!” would pass through with such a strict mother. And even if she says it there is no way her mother would understand. Even Yuu himself wouldn’t understand anything until he actually interacted with Haruha.

And because of that, Miharu is grieving over her actions.

Objectively speaking, it’s about a child who rebelled against her parent who have been taking care of her for all her life and selfishly running away from home just because of a useless online game. Talk about being ungrateful.

Even so. No, exactly so.

Even if it is just Yuu alone he wanted to be her ally. He thought.

He still hasn’t heard anything about whether her mother knows that she’s here or not at the moment, and then Haruha shook her body.

“.....nn.....uuh.....”

He was relieved that she didn’t wake up, but it seems that they have talked too much.

While he's looking at Haruha's hair, he whispered to Miharuru.

"Let's just sleep shall we"

After replying with "Yes" Miharuru slowly closed her eyes while stroking Haruha's head.

Yuu closed his eyes shortly after and strangely, his consciousness sank smoothly into slumber. Was he finally used to this situation? Did his body use up oxygen from that conversation and his brain requests a rest? Or.....

As he thinks about that, his consciousness was slowly sucked into the night and bed by the gravity.

But it was interrupted as he realized he hasn't entered 『CtG』 at all today.

—Kugimiya Miharuru is weak in the morning.

Maybe because she has low blood pressure or something. A while after waking up, her memories before sleeping were jumbled together and she forgets what she did. Today is exactly like that.

"Nnnn.....nnuu....."

Waking up in a fragile state, she stretched out while ringing her throat.

In the past few days, she has been living in her close friends' houses, so she wasn't surprised when waking up in an unfamiliar room. But,

(.....Whose house was I staying at yesterday? Ton-chan? Koro-chan?)

She couldn't remember. What enters her blurry vision were "I'm not sure which color should I pick, for now I will just buy black or gray colored stuff"-like furniture, it was a boring dark room.

(It's like a boys' room.....)

It was a tidy room. It's not like there is just a few stuff in the room, but most of it was placed neatly on the shelf or above the desk. And on the shelf there are plastic models lined up.

"As I thought, really boy-like—"

As she sloppily ruminates the room through her eyes— she got interrupted by a murmur.

Besides the bed Miharuru is sitting on, a girl is sleeping. She has fluffy hair and cuteness that undoubtedly will convince you that she's the world cutest, most beautiful girl.

And, right beside that gem-like girl there was a very mediocre-looking boy sleeping. And that boy was wearing a T-shirt and knee-length half-pants which is known to be the rudest display to show to a woman.

Her head boiled up—and she remembers everything in that moment.

That's right..... yesterday, "daughter" Haruha came out from the game and they started to live together in "the daughter's father's" house. And then, due to Haruha's request the three of them slept together..... She recalled that she had an embarrassing talk before sleeping but couldn't exactly remember what it was.

After this, just what kind of face should I wear when facing Kasugai-kun.....? It feels like they had a pretty chaotic distance against each other from the beginning.

And speaking of Kasugai Yuu, he's hugging Haruha with a very loose face; it doesn't seem he will wake up any soon.

Looking around, there was a digital clock displaying "Sat 0908" on the bedside. Yuu's school should be off on a Saturday—In Saturday Clamp appears in『CtG』 right in the morning—so maybe it's time for them to wake up. Since it will be bad for Haruha's education.

Even so, to brutally wake up an Angel from her peaceful first sleep in her life is just too much for Miharuru to bear. First of she should just wake Yuu up.

If she raised her voice she would wake Haruha up too—she hesitates. Probably it has been over six years since the last time she ever touched a sleeping guy. But, it will be problematic for their life in the future if she gets embarrassed over things like this.

(That's right. Compared to Russhy (Super-scary even though it's a Pomeranian^[24]) from the neighbor, a boy or two is nothing.....!)

While encourage herself, she gingerly placed her hand on Yuu's shoulder. No reaction.

It can't be helped so she tried to use more strength but it doesn't seem to do anything.and even so,

“Somehow this is scary.....”

When touching Clamp in『CtG』 it was always through a thick layer of clothes. But to directly touch it like this sure gives an uncomfortable feeling.

Come to think of it again, his physique is not that block-like but his arms and legs are way more masculine than hers, it looks kind of heavy. His toe looks like gravel. She recalls the drawing lesson she had during art class in junior high where she was told to imagine girls as plants and boys as mineral.

(Were boys all like this.....?)

She tries to recall back when she hit her father's back when she was young, but it was so long ago that her memory went foggy.

As if trying to look beyond his shadowy face, she looks directly at the boy's face. It's different from Clamp's the calm and firm imprisoned face or his unreliable troubled-like face. Kasugai Yuu's sleeping face looks slightly like Haruha's, it was very defenseless.

Unable to escape her drowsiness she unconsciously moved her finger and touched the hair on Yuu's cheek.

“Nnn.....”

Her eyes met Yuu's eyes who woke up while letting out a tired voice.

“.....eeh? Ku..... Kugimiya-san.....?”

It seems Yuu is quite a morning person and immediately recognized Miharu's existence. But, even so, however you look at it, this situation appears like — nothing but — Miharu stroking his head while looking at his sleeping face, and to swallow this situation is an entirely different case.

Miharu panicked in various ways. Her face turned red, and the advanced language skill action to explain will indefinitely fail her. But to stay silent in this situation would just nominate her as a strange person. That's why, she gathered all her courage into her throat, and let out a word of excuse as if pouring it all out,

“A, aim chorry!”

She bit her tongue.

“.....? Eh?”

Because of all the commotion they made, Haruha finally woke up and opened her eyes.

And then, the sight in front of her during her first memorable moment was.

The figure of her father with a question mark floating above his head, and the figure of her mother who looks like she was about to cry

“.....nnniya?”

After that they started the discussion over the alarmed zone, for now the misunderstanding between Miharuru and Yuu has been cleared. (To sum it up the truth “It turned out like that when I tried to gently wake you up” has been recognized as sounding strangely like a lie)

While Yuu was preparing a simple breakfast, Miharuru was dressing up Haruha on the bed.

Accompanied by the morning sun that dimly entered the room, she combs Haruha’s hair. No matter how disordered your hair became, it can be set straight in an instant in 『CtG』, so this was a fresh new sensation for Haruha.

While having her hair straightened, Haruha was happily humming the Rasupuchan theme song, Miharuru modestly spoke.

“W-Well Haruha..... It’s about the sleeping together with Kasugai-kun you see”

As expected, her voice was stiff. She was able to sleep yesterday, but it was right after that incident this morning, she can’t do it anymore.

(As a boy Kasugai-kun is not that scary..... but, sleeping with a boy is just too much for me)

Sorry Haruha, but from today onwards, she will convince her to sleep with only just the two of them.

But right before she started her persuasion, Haruha stopped humming and

said.

“Hear~, Haruha you see~. Today~, when waking up~, in the morning~—”

Her lisp voice over her shoulder was melting like butter.

“Haruha was hugged, by daddy!”

To be exact, it was Haruha who first hugged Yuu, but from her perspective Yuu was the one who couldn't let her go.

“Haruha sure~, daddy is~. When waking up, if Haruha is not there, will be sad, and scared..... so *squeeze*, he grabbed Haruha”

Haruha placed her small fist on her mouth, and “Kufufufu.....” happily laughed. After that, she loosened her face.

“Really, daddy sure is childish”

.....This is bad. To show such a good smile, like hell she was able to say that it was the last time to sleep with daddy.

The morning sunlight that passed through the window created a small sunny spot on the bed, in the room there was Haruha who was in a great mood for awakening in the best morning, and Miharu who lost her strength and dropped her shoulder.

It was the morning of a certain mother and daughter.



After Yuu and others finished their breakfast, Hajime Hidari showed up in front of the Kasugai household entrance.

“Yaayaa! Good morning! How are you guys?”

it could be because there was no Niiro today, she's in 'glasses onee-san' mode right in the morning. While feeling something like heartburn, Yuu passed through the living room.

”Somewhat fine. At least Haruha is energetic as always”

“Right. Haruha sleeps and wakes up properly”

“Gufugh!?t, that certainly looks like it” said Yuu while staggering over a good tackle by Haruha, who had changed into cute children's clothes. Hajime looked at Yuu and Miharu sequentially.

“Well then..... I will have to make some adjustments on Haruha’s end. I think it will take around half a day. You guys may go out in the meantime”

“Go out..... You mean with Haruha?”

“Yes! Like a date.”

“NO WAY!” answered Yuu and Miharu in unison -- causing them to look at each other.

“Do you hate it that much?” they both thought.

While smiling, Hajime offered a proposal as she looked at the two.

“Then go run some errands. You need to buy various necessities whether if it’s for Haruha or not. Yuu-kun has school on weekdays, and Haruha is busy with school transfer among other stuff. It will be a problem if you don’t do it while you can”

She was certainly right. But,

“Is it okay to take Haruha out here and there? Because..... it has only been a while since she came out”

“That’s why we will have you use the car to move around. The driver is from the institute, so he can carry out various errands to some extent, and besides——”

Hajime paused and mischievously closed one of her eyes.

“Both of you are the best couple chosen by the Nephilim Computer which created that 『CtG.』. Both of you are her parents, and she is counting on you so be proud of yourselves”

Several minutes and meters from the national highway later, Yuu and the group walked to the supermarket chain stores.

It would be easier if they went to the general supermarket near the station, but it will be very problematic and awkward if they happen to meet an

acquaintance from the neighborhood. That's why they went all the way to a place where students don't visit that much. It's indeed an unfamiliar shop but..... just thinking how bad it would be if they meet Fuyufu, this is not a problem at all.

The person from the institute who drove them all the way here—who, by the way, was a very kind-looking man— said that he will wait in the parking lot. Along with Haruha who was holding hands with Miharu, the three of them passed through the entrance.

The store lets out the atmosphere of a typical suburb. It's a two-story building but it's profusely wide. There is a foreign cinema at the back probably because the management materials are from Tebiro^[25].

Miharu, who curiously surveyed inside, asked casually.

"Do you come here often?"

"No. It has been two years since the last time I came here"

Yuu wanted to say that he used to come here with his mom in their car. But he didn't.

"It didn't seem like it changed that much. They should have most household goods provided here"

The first thing they would have to get would be clothing and bedding leaving groceries for last. Food, clothing and shelter they say after all. As for the funds, they have the card Hajime gave them so they should have quite a bit of excess money.

"Well then..... first let's find a bed and make a order. We might forget about it later" Yuu proposed.

Miharu's face turned red.

"Eh? You're saying we should change to a double bed?"

"No. It's not like we can sleep in the same room forever, so I think we should buy a bed for Kugimiya-san too"

".....of course"

Since this morning, Miharu has been confused over various things. She squatted down, groaning, while being hugged by Haruha who's acting as a tranquilizer.

"Ohh~, what is this place?" said Haruha as she restlessly walked through the store with her sparkling big eyes.

『At nine o'clock yesterday evening, a woman who lost consciousness in a room in the Tokyo residential area was discovered by a family member. The woman was immediately taken to the hospital, and it seems that her life is not in danger, but the cause of the syncope is unknown. According to the doctor there is no problem in the woman's health condition.....』

The large TV on display was showing today's news. Yuu didn't stop walking, but somehow it caught his attention. It's the incident that Fuyufu mentioned before.

『This kind of fainting incidents also have been occurring at various other places in the past few weeks, the cause of this unexplained fainting is unknown and the number of victims within the country has reached over thirteen people. Although it still hasn't reached a serious level yet, those who are living alone are advised to frequently contact other people as an effort to minimize the damages that might occur from these incidents』

".....Maybe it's time to call uncle after a long time." Yuu thought.

"What a scary story" said Miharu anxiously. And then Yuu suddenly remembered "That's right..... I'm no longer alone now."

"Daddy! Haruha found something cool!" reported Haruha to Yuu who was taking a break on a nearby bench. Miharu was looking for clothes to buy while Yuu, being a guy, became inevitably bored.

He was sitting beside Haruha, but the moment he took his eyes off her, Haruha took off and went somewhere. She came back holding a colorful box about the size of a concrete block.

"Fufufu", she giggled as she looked inside the box. Through it's window^[26] Yuu saw the doll inside, and inside of the box 『Figurine Mystical Priest Girl Rasupuchan 5』was written. It appears to be one of the good characters from the anime Haruha watched last night.

“Isn’t this for sale!? Don’t take it without permission!”

“Aww~.....” said Haruha as she frowned.

It was very unlikely for him to get mad at Haruha who was showing a dissatisfied face like a spoiled kid. He held her hand and had her guide him back to where she found the box. Fortunately, it was from the nearby toy store and they were able to promptly return it to the shelf. Since there were piles of similar box lined out, it seems to be a popular product.

“Haruha. In stores like this, you must pay with money”

“Stores goods are bought from a product list, right? And dropped items are free to take, right?”

“.....That is only inside the game. Here you must put item you like inside the basket, and then buy it by hand from the employees there. If you don’t do that and take it outside, you will become a thief. Thieves are bad people”

“I must use a harsh tone when saying this” thought Yuu. Haruha pouted as she looked at the Resupu-chan figure regretfully.

“But daddy, you often steal stuff, right?”

“Don’t say things like that..... and it's just inside the game, like taking a weapon from a monster, or dealing with the robbery incident that time”

“Come to think of it Kasugai-kun, when fighting Humanoid (Artificial Human) you often beat them by 《Snatch (steal)》 their weapon, right?” said Miharu as she showed up from behind. She’s holding stuffed paper bags on both her hands. It seems she finished purchasing clothes.

“Why do you keep on doing such bothersome things?”

It was the first time Yuu realized that Miharu’s mouth would smoothly work when the topic is about the game. The same goes for Yuu as well.

“Well, even though it seems like a bothersome thing, it’s still a technique. Stealing the enemy’s weapon while empty handed, and then, in perfect timing, activate a semi-auto attack; it’s a style that relies heavily on preliminary actions. It’s a distinct specification of『CtG』I say”

Yuu used the word “specification”, but it was not mentioned in any official

announcement so it fell under the vague line of either is it a bug or not. In other words: a hidden trick. The requirement of this is that the opponent must equip a weapon and you must go empty-handed. If you fail to steal their weapon you will be in a huge pinch, and first of all it's a technique most player don't know about.

"Huh? But Kasugai-kun, even though the opponent uses ranged weapons you still forcefully try to steal it, isn't that just a hobby of yours?"

"Daddy is just trying to show-off"

Yuu averted his eyes as he was unable to say anything against Miharu's and Haruha's continuous attacks.

"To be able to beat down the opponent instantly is cool" Yuu thought. That's why he relies so much on it. The players who would level up their 《Snatch》skill for such reasons would be most likely just Yuu.

"A-anyway..... unlike in game, you mustn't take stuff from shelves and pots. Understand?"

"Ehh? From pots is bad too?"

Somehow, that was the part Haruha was shocked about.

"Yeah, you mustn't break things either"

"Just what....."

Ever since RPGs, especially the middle-age fantasy ones, reached the 3D era, pots at roadsides and indoors were objects that were free to inspect and break. People may selfishly examine it without permission and freely take miscellaneous items from it although these are not just the only items you can get. It is a daily routine and an important factor that prevents players from losing their willingness in investigating towns and villages.

In this world where rummaging and breaking pots is forbidden, for Haruha who is literally a brainchild of the game, this is a paradigm crisis.

"The... then, what can Haruha break?"

"I'll buy her a bubble warp later" thought Yuu at that moment.

Right after that, Miharu returned to the topic at hand.

“.....By the way, what were you looking at?”

“It’s Rasupu-chan”

Haruha, who surprisingly got over her depression fast, pointed at the 『Figurine Mystical Priest Girl Rasupu-chan (5)』.

“It’s amazing, you know? She’s doing her deathblow pose”

Because of how pushy Haruha is, Yuu once again took the item and looked at the description.

Just like what Haruha said, despite being palm-sized, the position of her body perfectly replicates the Shiberia super deadly poison pose. Truly a gem of a item. But, after realizing something he returned it to the shelf.

“Haruha..... I’m sorry but it’s written here 『For fifteen years old and above』. In this world, Haruha is around eight, so you must be older to buy it”

In response to Yuu’s explanation, Haruha, as if dying, asked a question with her pure eyes.

“Why can’t Haruha buy anime toys for little girls?”

“Yeah... Really, I wonder why.....”

Why would a figurine of a currently airing anime aimed for little girls be a merchandise for fifteen-year-olds? Yuu, feeling helpless, was unable to answer her question.

How can they cheer up Haruha? She already had her shoulders lowered, feeling down from the pot incident and more? At times like this it’s best to leave it to Miharu who is also a young girl at heart.

“H-here Haruha. This one is okay for three-year-olds and older”

What she found from the shelf was a soft Rasupu-chan vinyl doll. It’s a set along with a rival character called Fu-Nyanchu which is cheap, but very unrefined, and the only thing moveable was its shoulder which can only rotate in a circular motion. Moreover, its face doesn’t look like the real one at all. It’s reminiscent of a voodoo doll used by ancient people as an object of worship, it has a distinct appearance of a dopey person or of someone spacing out.

Yuu made a bitter smile.

“Well, Kugimiya-san. I don’t think that.....”

“Uwaa——! A battle set——!!”

“E-e-eh she’s overjoyed!?”

After saying “I’ll get this for you” and passing the doll to Haruha who let out cheers with her sparkling round eyes, Miharuru whispered to Yuu in a pleasant voice.

“Still, quantity over quality”

“..... was I this simple when I was young.....?”

As he thought, Haruha’s personality is way younger compared to her physique. From what he remembered, Fuyufu and his cousins were more impertinent when they were at the same age as Haruha right now.

Moreover Yuu himself was a child who would say harsh and heartless words to others—

『It’s okay that you did not visit me one the day you promised me a month ago. but mom, do you understand the meaning of the words “promise” and “lie”? Could it be that you remembered it wrong and mixed up their meanings? learn Japanese right already』

.....Just remembering it makes him loathe himself.

Compared to Haruha who was cheerfully looking at the toys on the shops with Miharuru, Yuu was the complete opposite. Maybe the reason why Yuu accepted Haruha easily was because he hoped she would become a child who would love her mother in exchange of himself.

And to that thought— he shook his head.

“No..... isn’t that exactly what a playing doll is?” thought Yuu

He let out a small sigh, and carried their shopping. It wasn’t that heavy.

“Well then..... Maybe it’s time for us to go back. It feels kind of bad to keep people waiting”

It took around two hours for them to finish buying the needed household

goods and groceries, including having lunch at a random store at the food court.

“Aww~..... we’re going home now?”

Haruha who was happily helping Yuu by pushing the shopping cart appears to be unhappy. She expressed her dissatisfaction by hitting the cat paw-pattern cushion she picked herself earlier. But, Miharu then said “Well, hmm.....” with a weary voice out of fatigue and nodded.

Unexpectedly, Haruha (excluding the case in the toy store) no longer takes off anymore as soon as you take your eyes off her.

However, every time something catches her interest she would grab either Yuu or Miharu’s arm and drag them here and there. As her guardian, it’s very exhausting. Even so, they have to keep an eye on her no matter how often they tripped and fall.

Even though they were just shopping, Yuu is still not used to handling a child and quickly became both physically and mentally tired. In the end he went outside through the parking lot and walked through the busy passageway.

The girl who was walking right in front him recognized his awfully familiar face.

The reason for their meeting with Kodzuchi Fuyufu on that day was a very simple one.

She got invited by her friend from the Table Tennis club to watch a mania-aimed B-rate movie which didn’t screen in major cinemas. They had that friend’s older sister, who was at that time searching for a job, to bring them there with a car. Thanks to that, Fuyufu, her friend, and her friend’s sister ended up giggling from the depths of their lungs after watching the action splatter movie 『The Goblins’ Pipeline Grand Strategy』.

After that, they parted with the friend’s sister who wanted to take a nap in the car. The two then walked to a clothes store at the super market to spend time. It was then when the encounter took place.

Why is Yuu, who always caged himself inside the house playing 『CtG』 when not attending school and shopping, is here in such a suburb super market? If that was the case, Fuyufu would think that Yuu was shopping with his uncle

whom she was acquainted with. But...

Yuu was, walking alongside a girl.

The girl, who appears to be bashful, is around the same age as Fuyufu and Yuu.

Yuu was pushing the cart and right beside him was that girl, who was talking about a shampoo brand or something. They're undoubtedly acquainted with each other, and they're shopping together.Shampoo? What? Eh???

"No..... way....."

Crack... As her body was about to fall, along with the floating mark inside her heart started to rotate, her friend swiftly took hold of her. As expected of the table tennis club, her legs are very agile and reliable.

"Fuyu-cchi! Keep yourself together!"

"To think that Yuubocchi^[27] is walking alongside a person other than me....."

"That's what you were so shocked about!?"

"Kugh..... could it be, that woman also possess the devil eye that is able to see ghosts?"

"What's up with that setting!?"

Hearing the loud voice of her friend, Yuu turned his body to their direction.

"F-Fuyu!? Eh? Aa..... wha, why are you here.....!?"

He let out an unusual panicked sound which was very unsightly. He was like an adulter that was caught cheating.

And the girl in question was hiding behind Yuu as if frightened.

Seeing that figure of her hiding behind Yuu's shadow made something deep inside Fuyufu's body go "ciiiiiing" as if it was letting out a metallic sound—

"Well, well! Isn't that Yuu-kun from Kasugai household I'm seeing here?"

With that clearly out-of-character way of speaking and hardened-like smile, she made a big pause. "Uuugh..." Yuu cried out through his throat, but then he produced a fake smile clearly knowing that running away was not an option.

"Y-yo, yoo. What a coincidence" said Yuu.

(.....The heck was that?) she thought.

He's acting different from normal. Usually he would be stubborn like a child and boorishly try to run away from Fuyufu. But, strangely today he is a bit different..... as if he does not want to show his bad side to the people with him.

"I see. As I have guessed, that woman is that kind of person to Yuu" she thought while keeping that creepy smile of hers on her face, as she started making a restless sound.

Fuyufu had stopped scolding Yuu about playing too much CtG since his mother died. Who would have thought he would dare get a woman without her knowing...

"Yeah... what a coincidence.. Who would have thought that the prefecture-level ranked loner Yuu would be walking around with such a lovely girl in this faraway place as if he's trying to escape the eyes of his acquaintances as if in the middle of pulling an affair?"

".....Don't expect me to butt in anything about the loner-whatsoever-thing that you said"

It's so typical of Yuu to say that, even though he went as far saying he won't butt into anything. It's hard to think that this guy whose previous life was most likely a sandbag would be popular.

— I see. So this is what people say as that kind of thing.

"『Dating Site Regulation Law』as its cover-up name would be too fancy"

"What did you just say!?"

"Then tell me, just from where did you get acquainted with that woman? Weren't you always locked up in your house—"

"Well... from the game!"

"Game.....? Could it be you pick up girls in 『CtG』 and hook off in an offline meeting or something?"

"Offline mee..? N-n-no! Mommy and daddy... you see... are《married》inside the game!"

“Married... Married you said—”

After repeating the word carefully— she noticed that the person she was talking to switched from Yuu to the one with a more youthful voice.

And as she looked down, she saw her skirt was being grabbed by a small hand.

It's a girl. A girl around the age of eight with a fluffy hair and very innocent pure eyes.....

“D-Don't, Haruha!”

For the first time, that woman raised her voice. She quickly grabbed and embraced the girl called “Haruha” and kept her from saying anything more.

“E-Erm..... I'm sorry. She says weird stuff; she's a child you see.....”

The child protested, “It's not weird!” while flopping her feet, but she was silenced with the woman's puffed breasts.

But it doesn't matter. If the child won't talk, she can just get the answer directly from the woman who sealed the girl's mouth.

“So, who are you?”

“Aa..... u, I, I”

The woman suddenly went silent. Even though she moved quite vigorously when she stopped that child, when it's about herself she becomes completely weak.

“W-Well, you see, I'll explain this later, so—”

“Shut up, Loner. Sandawara star has no relation with lightning magic attack you know”

“At least make it understandable!”

Yuu let out a grunt right from his stomach, but she ignored that. Fuyufu felt something. “This woman must reveal her own identity. Something. Right! A premonition!” she thought.

That's why, she introduced herself.

“I'm Kudzuchi Fuyufu. I'm... a neighbor of Kasugai Yuu”

And then her introduction— this forced the woman in front of her to react in a way beyond her imagination.

“Ee.....Fuyu, fu..... -san?”

The woman showed a stunned expression, then her pupils slowly dilated, and then dulled hollow. In the same manner, Yuu’s face turned pale.

And then, the woman smiled as she stood up. It was the kind of smile that forces a tingle on her cheek. That somehow reminded her of the nitroglycerin smile faced Yui at first. She switched back to Fuyufu and then politely lowered her head.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Let me introduce myself, my name is Kugimiya Miharu.”

And then, the final blow.

The little girl — Kugimiya Miharu, said while smiling awkwardly:

“Due to some complicated situation, I’m currently staying at Kasugai-kun’s house. It was nice meeting you, Fuyufu-san”



• • •

It took around three minutes for Fuyufu to regain her consciousness.

“Haa!?”

“Fuyu-cchi! It seems you’ve finally regained consciousness!”

It seems that she lost her consciousness while standing. Her friend wiped her sweat as she let out a sigh of relief.

“Where are Yuu and the others?”

“Someone was waiting for them that’s why they left earlier. He said “I’ll explain this later! Though..... wonder what was that about?”

She somehow remembered Yuu saying that in a very serious tone. Seeing how desperate he was, they really might be in a circumstance where he can’t say anything yet.

But still... just what kind of situation is that shut-in in, to make him take an unfamiliar girl into his house. Moreover.....

In order to calm down her confusion, both of them sat down on a bench near the nearby comfort room^[28] while drinking canned coffee. Her friend, who’s sitting next to her pouted.

“But still, Kasugai-san sure is cruel. Even though he has Fuyu-cchi already...”

“.....Yuu is not that kind of person”

“That again. It’s not about that, didn’t they say that they suddenly started living together? Or more like, I thought Kasugai-san is the one who has feelings for Fuyu-cchi—”

“Really, it’s not that”

After she let out a little grunt, they went silent for a moment.

It’s really not that. All she was was Yuu’s friend since childhood, and also her first friend as far as she can remember. Every time they see each other, Yuu’s mother would say “Please get along with Yuu”. Their relationship is just that. Their inseparable bond gives birth to a small flower. It’s really just that.

But, whether it is a misunderstanding or not, the fact that her friend was made

for her sake is the truth, it was embarrassing but at the same time, it made her glad.

“Haa!!” exclaimed Fuyufu

“Eh?” responded her friend in surprise.

“I wanted to eat a large serving of parfait at the food court but I can’t eat it all. I’ll treat you so help me”

“If you give me all the pudding I’m in”

Her grin turned into a smile and they stood up. And in front of Fuyufu, a small boy showed up, appearing to be rushing to the toilet. Seeing that,

She remembered. The child, who was with Yuu and Kugimiya Miharū, if she’s not mistaken, she was called...

Haruha.

That name meant “small flower” and it was from her memories with Yuu.

Before they entered elementary school, the two of them often played house. It was the name of the doll Fuyufu was always carrying around. That’s right. Fuyufu said it's name proudly.

“Haruha.”

The doll is now kept in her closet, and the memory of “Haruha” was driven to the corner of her memories. And now, she showed up here and was able to grab her skirt.

—Moreover, that Haruha, what did she say when she called Yuu and Kugimiya Miharū?

Something is wrong.

“.....Just what is happening around that idiot?”

At the corner of Fuyufu’s view, at the electronics department, the words “Merchandise advertisement! 『CtG』 -use terminal bargain starts this week!” were displayed.



“Well, I’m sorry for having you to come back here in a hurry. That car will be used by the institute you see”

What awaits them when arriving at the Kasugai household was, Hajime Hidari wearing relaxing light clothes while sitting cross-legged, appearing to be typing something on the large-type Ramiel from before with her laptop.

“But still, it might be good timing. The setup will be over soon”

“We can finally, go inside the game?”

While her parents were busy sorting out their luggage, Haruha who was empty-handed went to hug Hajime’s back.

“Guuuuh~..... that’s right. Because Haruha-chan has a special body, a special device is required. We will perform tests from now, both of you heads on and prepare—”

Hajime turned around, and at the other side of her sight was— a heavy atmosphere, that makes you picture the *rumble rumble rumble* onomatopoeia in the air, has been fostered.

Yuu and Miharu are sorting out each of the things they bought. Yuu is sorting out groceries and electrical products, while Miharu was sorting out clothing, both of them were silent, not just words, they won’t even glance at each other.

“.....Eh? What? Did something happen?”

Even though they had quite a nice atmosphere before they went out..... she asked Haruha, the girl who’s their daughter, and she turned her gaze upwards.

“Somehow, on our way home daddy met a neighbor or something, and then mommy got mad”

It was somewhat hard to tell, but for now she recognized it as a fight.

“Well, this is surely a rocky start”

For these kids and for this project (humankind). Hajime made a bitter smile and stroked Haruha’s head.

“Well.....”

While tossing several foods into the refrigerator, Yuu opened his mouth.

“If you have something to say, please say it”

Although his words are requesting, somewhere within it the nuances of yielding is blurred in.

However, after removing the tag for the clothes she’s going to wear Miharuru,

“Nothing. There is nothing”

She flat out said.

A few minutes after their encounter with Fuyufu, since the moment she declared that she’s living in the Kasugai household, Miharuru has been silent the whole time. Even though she would smile and talk normally with Haruha, each time her eyes met Yuu’s she would avert her eyes. It was just like the first time they met.

Yuu intends to understand the reason why she’s so mad though. It might also be about Haruha’s name. But, regardless whether to apologize or stay silent, he’s too anxious to check with words and unable to put it into action.

That said, even if he went out of his way to ask, it feels like she won’t answer anyway, in the end he stayed silent.

“Daddy.....”

While thinking that, Haruha who’s holding the newly brought cat paw-pattern cushion shows out of nowhere right beside him.

“Nn? What is it Haruha”

“Hidari-chan said, the preparation is finished so go ahead and go inside the game”

“Roger. I’ll go as soon as I am finished sorting this out”

Even though he already said yes, Haruha remained standing there. She’s tightly embracing the cat paw cushion while standing. While thinking of something, Haruha faced him with upturned eyes.

“Nee..... did daddy have a fight with mommy?”

It was rare for her to whisper. Back when they were inside the car he was too busy watching the outside views to care, but clearly she would be suspicious that things are getting weird.

Yuu softly stroked Haruha's head, and made a smile in a hurry.

"It's not a fight"



—That's right, it's not even worth calling it a fight.

"I think"

Several tens of minutes after that, within a hotel room at Terminus Cradle.

There was the figure of Clamp sitting on the floor, and the figure of Mifa staring down at him.

"To think that you named your own daughter after the name from the girl you like..... it's just sick isn't it?"

Mifa's eyes were as heavy as an iron ball. And that mouth of hers, speaks so well, as if venting all the anger Miharuru had been building up till now. Just like the sleeping story — although calling it that is a bit misleading — Miharuru told herself, Mifa (she) is the figure who can straightforwardly speak the words Miharuru couldn't say by herself.

In contrary, today Clamp is exactly that of a frog being stared down by a snake. But "Just say all that you want to say" was Kasugai Yuu's wishes from the start so it can't be helped.

"Ee, errr..... it seems you're misunderstanding something, Fuyufu is not like that—"

"But anyways, you still brought up the name from another girl right?"

"Uuuh....."

"It's not good you know"

“Yes.....”

“You’re a hopeless man you know”

“Certainly.....”

“Say “Aim chorry”, come on”

“Ai, Aim..... chorry.....”

It was Clamp who lowers his head each time Mifa speaks.

“Daddy and Mommy are doing something right?”

There was Haruha who was quietly listening to her parents’ conversation from outside the room. She was able to take a peek at Clamp who was gradually sitting lower and lower on the floor, but the distance between them prevents her from hearing much.

『It’s something that frequently happens in every household in this world』

Naturally Haruha restlessly looked around as she suddenly hears a voice ringing inside her head.

“? I can hear Hidari-chan’s voice?”

『Ehehe, this is the function of this special Ramiel. While I’m outside, I can see everything Haruha is seeing』

“If you went that far, Hadari-chan should just go inside the game too”

『I wanted to, but I also have to keep track of Haruha-chan’s body. How is it? To “return to your hometown”? 』

Haruha tilted her neck.

“Nnn..... somehow, everything feels so clear. And moving becomes so easy”

『Certainly. The body of you Hadzar are optimized in that world, the difference of the outside world is just too big to cover. 』

“You mean?”

『All information within “CtG” is purely made of Anthropic Code (Human Space Notation)..... Well, you can just think that the air in that world is clear. And because of that, if Haruha-chan did not breathe that clear air every few days it

will feels like your breathing is being jammed by something. Be sure to remember that. 』

“Like being mad because Haruha can’t break pots?”

『.....It has nothing to do with pots though, but the nuance is close maybe』

She didn’t get it, but she decides to do what she was told to. After all, Hidari is a good person (benefactor) who allows her to meet with her daddy and mommy.

As she thought about that, Clamp, who finally finished his conversation with Mifa, returns with a tired out face. Peeking inside, Mifa is still inside the room puffing her cheek. It seems she’s complaining while leaning on Payakino.

Haruha then rushed to Clamp. But, she stopped before hugging him like she normally would.

“Haruha. What did Hajime-san said?”

It seems that Yuu had been told about the communication function.

“She said, if Haruha don’t go inside the game, it will get hard to breathe”

“? You mean it will be bad if you don’t regularly go inside『CtG』?”

“It seems so”

It seems I will have to hear about this in detail later..... while thinking that Clamp stretched his hand, intent to stroke Haruha’s head, but that hand was caught by Haruha’s hands.

“Daddy”

“Nn?”

“If Daddy and Mommy are fighting, Haruha will.....”

She had something to ask and she opened her mouth, but suddenly she became afraid. Her throat stiffened and she fell silent.

“Haruha?”

“Uunn, nothing. Errm, are you going somewhere?”

“Aa. It’s a currently-ongoing quest, and it will expire soon so I’ll have to go”

“Haruha will go too!”

“I’m sorry Haruha. I want to be alone for a bit. Play with Mifa today”

While looking troubled, Clamp peeped at Mifa who remained in the room. Haruha then clenched her small fist tightly.

“Is it really, a fight.....?”

Her voice was trembling. Her two most important people are in a conflict with each other. She doesn’t know what to do.

The anxiety feels like having cold water flow down her spine. Wonder how much of that showed up through her face, Clamp went down on his knees in a hurry and held Haruha’s shoulder.

“Like I said, it’s not. Really, I’m just in a hurry.Actually I, have to play through this entire game, no matter what”

“Play through... entire game?”

Clamp nodded deeply, and it seemed like he came out with something.

“That’s right. I’ll say this to Haruha, the reason why I’m so fixated with this game. The thing, that I never told Mifa or anyone.”

“Mommy doesn’t know?”

“Aa. Because it’s not something I want to talk about. But, Haruha is special That’s why; keep this a secret from your mother”



A while after.

The figure of Clamp of Scarabaeus was at the Gunmans’ Glaive frontier town church.

At the end of the wilderness of a deserted town, is a place with no characteristics other than being the capture point of a nearby armed bandits’ fort.

Still the reincarnation mirror that leads to Terminus Cradle was stationed

inside the church, and Clamp was taking a rest in that humble place. The mirror was placed at the spot where a cross or an object of worship would usually be in a real church, and he rest his back on top of one of the facing settee there.

Just now he had finally finished his quest and was just about to go back, but now he wanted to be alone.

There are lots of things to think about. First off, a reflection.

(.....I don't even know what a proper 『Parent』 is and why did I end up being one?)

Just remembering what he did to Haruha would upset his stomach. That's right— when a child seeing adults having a quarrel that he/she can't interfere, he/she won't be mad or sad, but be worried. Realizing how thin their existence is.

And there Yuu, who should know that more than anyone, showed an ungraceful behavior towards Haruha and upset her. From her perspective, the two of them are lacking awareness to the fact that they're adults as well.

The definition of adult and child is connected, for example when there are person at the age of 10 together with a five year old inside an elevator, that person will be the “adult”. The current Kasugai household is exactly like a “child and child elevator”.

But he acts firmly inside the house “House” he thought at least.

(But still..... how will I explain it to Fuyufu when I'm back in the real world? Niiro-san said that he will make a fake scenario about Haruha and Kugimiya's circumstances but I haven't hear anything about that yet)

“.....And I didn't think Kugimiya-san would be so angry”

He sighed maddeningly. He wasn't able say anything against Fuyufu's stuns or about Haruha's naming, but Yuu himself still had something to say.

“Wasn't she (Mifa) who said 『This is a game after all』at first?”

Moreover there's no way to expect that the child developed a personality and arrived in the real world. If only they knew that in advance ,they would think about that more seriously.

However, there is no meaning in talking about it now.

For Yuu and Miharu, that little girl is Haruha and just Haruha<-- Daniman1: These two “Haruha” are written differently, first in Katakana referring to Haruha in the game world and the second in Kanji is referring to Haruha in the real world -->, there is no way they can come out with any other name now. Even Miharu who strongly criticized it didn't say anything about changing her name.

That name, that symbol, that word possess a special meaning inside their hearts.

It's such a strange story. A child who was born from inside a game suddenly shows up in the real world and a day had already passed since then. Normally it would be impossible, an event that looks like fantasy by common sense. But even so, somehow they managed to start their life, with Haruha who don't know anything about real life, and with Miharu whose personality is the complete opposite in game.

Speaking of troubles, he will have to think of an excuse for the grumpy childhood friend, and a way to shorten his distance with the grumpy “daughter's mother”. Of course after that he will have to think about taking Haruha to school and about Miharu's house circumstances, there is undoubtedly a lot of trouble to take care of.

But even after considering Haruha's origin and circumstances, this is still too idyllic.

As he thinks about that, the small door of the small church opens.

Looking at the direction of the door, a black shadow slowly takes form and a familiar figure is seen. The familiar figure then approaches him with a familiar voice.

“Yaa, what a coincidence”

Coincidence sure is coincidence, but it's also somewhat given. A sister (nun) showed up. But she's just wearing sister-like equipment, it's not like she's an actual sister. She shouldn't be that far from Clamp, she's a common player.

Clamp answers as he dug through his memories.

“You’re from the robbery incident—”

“Yes. I’m glad you remember me”

Of course he remembers. That scene of the day which Haruha did during that robbery wasn’t something he can simply forget. And to add on, her color edited clothes were all RGB zero— she’s wearing all black.

And— somehow she has unforgettable eyes. A dark golden like a melted tiger’s fur, a pupil that makes people who sees it become restless.

“I’m really grateful when you saved me that time, thank you very much”

It was a sweet voice that sounds like a slight lisp despite her polite tone of speech.

“But I’m didn’t.....”

As he gets troubled replying — since there is a high probability that the topic will lead to Haruha — the girl arrived in front of Yuu.

She’s a distinctive girl with silver long hair peeking out from her veil and a sharp face contrary to her easygoing expression.

“Is something wrong?”

The girl who tilted her head looks very similar to Haruha. No, it’s not like her facial features are alike..... but, softly, her otherworldly atmosphere and her distance towards reality is just like her. If Haruha was a little bit older she might look like this. That trait of hers makes you believe that...

“Well..... a bit, you remind me of someone I know”

The girl faintly smiled and sat down on the seat right next to Clamp's. And then, she once again introduced herself.

“My name is Memento Copellia^[29]. Please call me Meme if possible”

Clamp introduced himself back. Mement said “Clamp of Scarabaeus huh” curiously. She must have changed her sight to AR (Extended) mode and read Clamp’s tag. It reminds him of the time when he first met Mifa.

It really feels like long ago.....as his thoughts pulled back to its original direction, Memento speaks out a noise-like sweet voice.

“Hei, Onii-san. If you happen to have, time would like to have a little talk with me?”

“A talk?”

“Just a small talk”

Clamp nodded without hesitation. It does sound a bit too sudden, but it might be good for a change of pace.

Memento then touched her lips with her finger and started the story.

“Does Onii-san know about 『Pandora Box』?”

He doesn't know much but he had heard of it before. It's one of those Greek mythologies.

The god who was angry that humans discovered the technology to control fire gives a box to a girl named Pandora in order to torment humankind, the god told her “You mustn't open this box no matter what” but the girl then opened the box out of curiosity. And then all kind of disasters from inside the box pops out and humankind who peacefully lived came to an era of suffering. But inside the box there is one single “Hope” that was left—

It's more or less like that. There is also some heresy but Yuu don't know more than that.

After Clamp answered what he knows, the girl nodded and continues.

“You know, Meme always thought about this. There is 『Hope』 left inside the box right? Could it be that there was only 『Hope』 inside the box from the very beginning?”

“Eh? But, since catastrophe happened when the box was opened won't it be logical to think that there is disaster inside it too?”

“That is the god's trap. In order to torment humans who obtained the wisdom to use fire, the god blessed another wisdom for them”

“Knowledge..... you mean?”

“It's hope. Surely humanity at that time didn't know what hope is and spent each day aimlessly. And then the foolish Pandora opened the box and the people

came to understand the concept of hope”

“Sounds pretty good I think”

“That’s right; hope itself is a great thing. But, as the concept of hope is born, at the same time, a 『not a hope』 twin is born. If people don’t know what hope is they won’t know the evil of the calamity. People who know hope can see it. Feel it. Aaah, this is 『not a hope』. For example when there is a victim of a natural disaster, those who know what hope is will just think of it as『Aaaa, it’s just a normal work of nature』. But, those who know hope will think『Why am I having such misfortune?』 So the disaster that came from the box is in fact just the awareness of misfortune of people who were drowned in luxury. The world does not have defects from the very beginning, all harm and mischief only exists inside a human’s head. Ignorance is bliss. If people remained insensitive they won’t know the concept of hardship and pain, but with his power god took it from them. That’s right, this world is polluted with 『Hope』”

“Huuuh..... that was a pretty interesting interpretation”

It was his honest impression. If you are supposed to understand a lesson from this myth it will be, “No matter how hard this world is to live in, hope is always there (that’s why don’t give up)” or maybe “Because there is hope people do futile things” he thought. But, based on her exegesis, having wisdom has both merit and demerit.

“But from that way of thinking, it’s such a disaster that the world becomes a place of humans resentment”

Clamp was genuinely impressed by the unique insight that girl had. Memento then smiled and nodded, and then shook her head.

“That’s right. But Onii-san, Meme thought. Thankfully because Pandora opened the box, the plain world is now exposed to the human’s hatred. The world that was nothing, became the『Enemy』that humanity must overcome in order to obtain a better life. If the world has feelings, won’t it be happy?”

“Will it be happy..... being directed with hatred?”

To Clamp’s doubtful question, Memento lowered her head a little. Her veil sways by the discolored air of the wilderness town.

“Onii-san thinks like that because you know what yourself is. Meme felt really happy when knowing what Meme is”

The girl laughed as she said that. Yuu unconsciously smiled seeing her, it was a smile filled with happiness.

But, as expected he doesn't get what she meant. Clamp shrugged.

“To know oneself, even I don't know such philosophical stuff. Then what are you, Memento?”

“Meme?”

The girl pointed at herself with blank eyes. That simplicity of hers really reminds him of Haruha.

“Meme is...”

And then, with a pure innocent face like Haruha's, the conversation comes to an end.

“This kind of thing”

Woosh

A sound of wind was heard from the back of his right ear.

Softly, without any herald, it was the sound of Memento's terrifyingly smooth knife getting stuck on the couch.

But Clamp had no idea what just happened. More than that, he can't even let out a groan. To be exact, he can't move at all.

It was because his throats was penetrated by the slender knife and got pinned to the chair.

“Kg..... agh..... uh.....!”

Clamp was confused.

He can't understand. An unbelievable thing just happened. Of course, he just received a sudden attack, but more than that, more than anything.

It hurts— it hurts!?

Even though they're inside 『CtC』 where all six senses are reproduced very

closely as if it was real, since this is still the form of a game, all sensations of pain are fully cut. Since there is no way the player would be able to withstand the pain of being cut by swords or burned by magic.

That's why immediately after the damage took place, the pain will be converted to a slight sense of discomfort and making their limbs slightly harder to move as a handicap..... or it was supposed to.

The sensation of pain is rushing through his entire pulse and his neck feels like it's melting. Even if he tries to budge, the intermittent pain would kill the brain's command to move. Along with the wet liquid spilling out from his wound and the edge of his mouth his body slowly losing its strength—

He glared at Memento Copellia with his eyes. That gaze of him was to ask about the unnatural pain he's feeling, but it seems that the girl was misunderstanding something. And then, the answer she gave afterwards further confuses Clamp.

“Why is Meme doing this? It's The Palimpsest..... no, to think that you're not informed of anything even though you're Haruha's guardian”

Memento knew Haruha. And judging from her words she knows more than Yuu.

“Meme is a Hadzar who couldn't become anything. And thanks to Haruha Meme was able to be reborn. But Meme still worries”

Hadzar— it's the name of the new humanity that was born from the world of『CtG』 Niirō talked about it before. Within his consciousness that was dominated by pain and confusion, Niirō's vacuous smile and Memento's innocent voice overlaps.

“Why Meme became Meme. In order to make sure of it, Meme will, that's why—”

Memento's words still continued, but at that time Clamp — Kasugai Yuu's consciousness was already drowned into the turbid water. The heat from his wounds turned cold from the air, and the back of his eyes were dyed in tides of darkness as his vision darkens—

Within the pitch black water. A mute spark was scattered.

“Artgh—Gahkgh!”

Kasugai Yuu awoke.

He puked out a substance that was stuck to the back of his throat — it was something very cold — and he violently cough. His wide open eyes were overflowing with a glistening light and his consciousness wildly writhed inside his brain.

Don’t know. I don’t know anything. I can’t think of anything. My heart. My heart, my heart just.

His entire body beats. It’s twirling. Inside his head was dominated by the beats and he can’t think of anything.

Who is it? What? What, what, what happened? What happened to me? What should I say to Fuyufu? No, I was stabbed. It hurts, it shouldn’t be like that! That’s right mom! It’s not I didn’t intend to—

“KASUGAI-KUN!!”

His confused mind and body was saved by that voice. It slowly returned. Focus.

The information reflected through his retina matches his senses; he’s lying in the middle of the living room, he recognizes Miharu, Hajime, and Haruha who were looking at him.

Hajime’s face slowly turn from pale back to her merry self, even though the air-conditioning is on, she’s drenched in sweat. On the carpet where his hand is, was some syringe lying — it seems they took it all off —

Haruha’s facial expression was hidden by her hair. But, the small hand on Yuu’s leg appears to be trembling.

And then, Miharu who pulled back Yuu’s consciousness— is pouring out tears.

Eeh.....? H couldn’t help but be surprised by the unbelievable reality in front of him, Miharu was still crying. The drop of her tears falls, and Yuu’s mind finally reaches his mouth.

“Kugimiya, -san.....?”

In front of Yuu’s dry voice Miharu wiped her tears with her hand and sniffled.

And then she shows a smile.

It's clear that she's forcing it, and that smile of hers looks like it is about to break down any moment, but it looks very appealing in front of Yuu's eyes.

"I'm glad..... ah"

But the next words coming from the girl's beautiful smile were hardly pleasant.

"Kasugai-kun, you just died"

Chapter 3: Interaction

The sudden separation Kugimiya Miharuru had with her father happened close to her 10th birthday.

It was not a separation by death like that of Kasugai Yuu and his mother however. It was just a common case of divorce. Her mother had not told her the reason why though and. It was not a rare occurrence in Miharuru's household at the time. If it was something her parents didn't want to tell her then that was that.

As a result, Miharuru lost her father without knowing anything, and. like a "good kid" Miharuru was at that time, she didn't even have the courage to inquire about it.

After that she didn't meet her father even once. Even though she thought she would meet him immediately after the divorce. Miharuru was very fond of her mild father, more than her overly strict mother, that feeling of for her was certainly strong.

However, after hearing the truth from her cousin in a family gathering, that feelings of hers withered. Her cousin had whispered "Because Haru-chan will be sad hearing it" with sympathy.

—In reality the reason for the divorce was because her father had fallen in love with another woman and was unable to break his relationship with her.

It was because of that, Miharuru was unable to trust any man no more.

To be exact, she had been already afraid of people in general, but her fear towards men was now more than that. It was because the man who used to treat Miharuru so kindly had ended up loving another woman more than his own wife or daughter.

From what she had heard, her father and mother met during high school and

married after dating for 10 years. She didn't know whether it was true or not, but from what her father had secretly told her, that was only when her mother had told him that she wanted to marry her first love. So wonderful— thought Miharuru, who knew nothing about romantic relationships at the time, it was her luck and fortune to be born under the love of her parents.

Yet... such a wonderful man like him ended up breaking his own family.

It was wrong.

Miharuru thought. She was a person who wanted to always be with the person she loves. To fall in love with a person who will always stay by her side, was something everyone, like her, wished for.

It will just be painful if it's not.

Since then, Miharuru committed to her mother. Her cousin was wrong. It was her mother who was sad and that was why she would always listen to whatever her mother said. Thus, Miharuru obediently went to an all-girls school. It was not like her mother thought that it would keep her away from men, but at least it was a place that would be completely unrelated to her father's wrongdoing.

It was right after she passed the entrance exam, Miharuru was shocked as she heard her mother said that she would be marrying a man she met at work. Miharuru was in dismay, so great was her dismay that she found it strange herself. She couldn't understand her mother. She knew that her mother broke up with her father. Her father was the bad one. But, why was it then that her mother tried to tie up with someone else after breaking up with her father? She kept asking herself but in the end, Miharuru couldn't even understand her own mother.

In the end, Miharuru was all alone. She was able to make some friends at school, but at home she was all alone, while her mother was with another person. It was not balanced and she was afraid. Miharuru didn't have the courage to go out, and instead she started playing 『CtG』 where she could interact with various kinds of people while inside the house.

Miharuru, who became "Mifa" in the virtual world tried to be someone different from her original self. Someone who could express the emotions that she was unable to show in the real world. "It was just a game after all" she had told herself, and under that spell, "she" became bolder than she ever was. The girl

who was timid in the real world found herself making a lot of acquaintances quickly. She felt comfortable to be able to be surrounded by a lot of people in this world.

When she was helping the guild 【Labyrinth Troupe】, where a girl she knew belonged to, she first met Clamp. Her first impression of him was actually less than favorable. Even though he was the same age as her, he was quiet and barely said any words. It was as if he was mocking her. However it was more than just that, the way he silently reject people and created distance felt like Miharu herself.

But, if she befriended with such person, Miharu felt that she won't be alone anymore. The moment when she spoke to Clamp with that feeling in her chest—finally, Mifa, Miharu, was no longer alone.

She had a treasure she shared with him-Haruha- and knowing that the person liked the same thing as her, she was able to believe that person even if he's a man. They grew closer little by little. Calmly yet also impatiently. He was very skillful when playing game, but on the other hand, was very clumsy when dealing Haruha or her.

Clamp.

She had met the Clamp in real life and for all his pretentious like figure, he was actually dull looking. But, he was very kind, and more so he was sincere when facing Haruha and Miharu. The “hunch” she had since the day he gave the name Haruha to that girl in 『CtG』 pretty much hit the mark.

Kasugai Yuu.

I'm not like my mother. I won't be sad. She thought.

But, he, already—



An hour had passed since Clamp went off and Mifa, who complained about Yuu to Payakino, received a request to log-out from Hajime through Haruha.

Miharu and Haruha, who didn't know why they were called back into the real

world couldn't believe the scene they immediately saw after removing their Ramiel.

It was the scene of Hajime piercing Yuu, who was lying on the floor, with a large pistol-shaped syringe on his chest.

"Eh.....what did you do Haru—"

"Quiet. I can't concentrate"

Hajime's expression was unrecognizably serious. The greasy sweat on her forehead was shining like red scales under the sunset.

After she carefully finishes the injection, she pulled out the syringe with terrifying precision and appropriately threw it away. Then, she took out a pad-shaped electrode from her bag and pressed it against Yuu's chest.

"Errm..... what.....?"

"It stopped."

Hajime answered frankly as she began to operate what appears to be the controller of the electrode.

Zap! It made a twitching sound and Yuu's body faintly bounced. It was like seeing a filature doll. But even after being shocked by the electricity, Yuu's thin eyes remained closed and did not react at all.

Before she realized it, Miharu's legs began shaking.

"Eh? Kasugai-kun? Eh? Why?"

Just a little while ago he was reprimanded about the case with Kodzuchi—something inside the game. Miharu's anger was real but frankly saying, it was just as simple as that. Even so— even so, why did it become like this?

Within these past two months, the face that looked like Clamp's which she met in 『CtG』 every day.... that sleeping face that made her heart beat just this morning... is different. *This face is completely different. This is..... this is like---

"He got killed inside 『CtG』"

In contrast to Miharu who was in the pinnacle of a hypnotic state, Hajime's voice was very businesslike. Miharu couldn't understand the meaning of that

answer, but that voice convinced her that it's "the truth".

"I'm sorry..... I didn't expect that not just Haruha but also Yuu-kun to be targeted"

Miharu nearly shouts.

(WHAT ARE YOU SAYING!?)

—is what she wanted to say, but she desperately held it in. No. There's something more important to say.

"Just hurry up and save him!"

"That's what I'm doing."

Hajime's voice remained calm. She sounded reliable but at the same time, it made Miharu want to let her outburst explode and slap her. She was in verge of panicking.

It was all too sudden. A Ramiel should've met safety standards and would not emit any strong signals, as a matter of fact, over a year had passed since 『CtG』 start running and there has been no health issue reported other than light dizziness. At least that was the case when Miharu checked it on the net before she started playing.

Yet, Yuu is dying in front of her eyes. All of the sudden her new everyday life that had just begun is leading towards its end.

Again..... again, she will be separated from someone without knowing anything. And this time, it's in a place where she can't go even if she wanted to. What came into her mind was a simple rejection.

No.

No no no!

It had only been a while since we first met but.

In the beginning we met as Mifa and Clamp, instantly got married, started raising a child as if playing house, we pushed our love onto Haruha as if she was our child, also he said that he loves my song.. when I first met him here, he was unreliable but also very kind..... and seeing him die while we're still fighting is

just unbearable.

First of all, Miharu still had a lot of things to say to Yuu. Wasn't it Yuu who said "Just say all that you want to say". It will be troublesome if he died now.

"Kasugai-kun, you don't know right..... you don't know why I was angry right!?"

The words which she couldn't say while being Mifa, they fell like flakes of snow. They fell along with her tears.

"When we were giving a name to Haruha, I was really surprised when Clamp said 『Haruha』. I was shocked thinking that you might know my name— Miharu. But soon I realized that it was just a coincidence..... but, then, I started to think that coincidences might be 『Fate』.

We met in 『CtG』 and held a strange marriage, then give birth to our very own child..... all of those special things were fated, then the person inside Clamp might be my destined... that"

But after saying all that, she got mad all of the sudden.

"And then..... why? In the end, YOU JUST GIVE HER THE NAME YOU GOT FROM THE GIRL YOU LIKE! WHERE IS MY FATE!? COME ON AND SAY SOMETHING!"

Hajime activated the device once again. Yuu's body began coughing violently like a caught fish.

As if gushing out all of her feelings, Miharu called Yuu.

"KASUGAI-KUN!!"



Thus Kasugai Yuu revived.

He was then carried to the hospital by the car that Hajime had called, and there he received a medical examination for the very first time in his life. No abnormalities— in fact far from it, he was actually "fairly healthy". By the time they received the result of the inspection, it was already night.

“Explain..... you will do it right.”

Just to be sure, Yuu had been told to stay in the hospital room for the night. Within the small private room, Yuu and Haruha, along with Niiro, the three of them talked. Yuu was lying on the bed, while Miharuru was sitting on a chair, right next to the bed, holding Yuu’s hand. Meanwhile, Niiro was leaning his back on the door.

Haruha and Hajime should be resting on the bench at the hallway. Hajime had already been relieved from the tension by the time they reached the hospital, while Haruha..... was still stunned and silent . When she first arrived, she was still being dragged along by Miharuru.

It should have been the adults’ obligation to explain the cause of this incident.

Niiru, who still did not want to take off his sunglasses like always, let out a dry voice.

“Currently, there is a dreadful Player Killer rampant in 『CtG』”

Come to think of it there was something like that on the 『CtG』 news line.

But.

“Player Killers..... they are people who attack other players inside the game, right? I understand that Clamp got beaten up by one of them,

But, why did Kasugai-kun end up like that?”

Miharuru questioned harshly, and her voice was shaking. Probably from fear, or perhaps, anger.

“That’s because the one who killed Kasugai-kun wasn’t human.”

“.....What was that?”

Memento Copellia. She was obviously not emotionless. However, the emotions she kept inside and the actions she displayed outwardly did not particularly match. Such a girl was similar to Haruha.

She had pierced Clamp’s throat while she was still smiling.

Just by remembering it, it brought back the pain he felt back then onto his uninjured neck. From what Hajime said, the pain still lingered in his conscious .

Niirō took out a mobile terminal and projected a figure of a girl on the air. She was now wearing different clothes which gave her a different impression, but, she was definitely still Memento.

“She— Memento is the first generation of Hadzar. A human born within 『CtG』”

“Isn’t that just like Haruha.....?”

“That’s right. She was born from the exact same nucleus, or core should I say. However, the method we used to develop her personality differed greatly. Memento was an approach from the outside, while Haruha was an approach from within. Simply put, Memento was born in that form from the very beginning. By physically analyzing a pre-existing body and memories we tried to create a complete human from the start.”

“Such things are possible.....?”

“We succeeded to some extent. It was a major breakthrough at the time and Memento was able to think normally within 『CtG』.

She was also able to move as freely as she wanted. However, no matter how many times we carried out an emotional response test, her results were always poor, She simply wasn’t able to develop proper emotions. It would have been fine, if what we aimed to do was to create a robot, but our, the Human Equilibrium Institute’s goal is to find a way to create a new human. She will continue to remain incomplete if we left her like that.

The resulting hypothesis is that there is defect in the Virtual World’s building capacity and so is unable to reproduce the 『something』 that makes human, human. It is most likely a factor that simple machines are unable to perceive.

That was the case—and thus someone proposed an experiment to give a real body for Memento and in the end we decided to go ahead with the experiment.”

So far, other than their education, she was exactly like Haruha. Eventually Haruha safely obtained a body in real life and became Kasugai Haruha. But Memento, she...

“The experiment was a failure. No, you can say that it was partially successful.

During Memento's transfer to the body, due to some unknown reason, her mind caused a rejection and as a result we had to 『discard』 the body. We managed to salvage Memento's mind but..... as Kasugai-kun had seen, she became a madman.”

“And why did Memento became a player killer?”

He asked, but more or less he had already guessed the answer. The Pandora's Box story that Memento talked about. The allegory she made— that all things in this world, the moment it opposed hope, it will no longer be a hope.

And so Niiro answer with the name of the “hope”.

“It's Haruha-san. Haruha who was raised by the most ideal pair determined by the Nephilim Computer, whose mind was carefully developed from the fetal stage, and was able to develop emotion that Memento was unable to.”

Miharu's grip tightened as they that held Yuu's arm.

“Our plan was to have Haruha-san to at least develop human characteristics to a certain degree.

Haruha-san succeeded, which meant there is no more reason to keep working on Memento. That's why, we isolated her from 『CtG』, and took her in as a sample. By that time, her mental state became severely unstable.”

“So in the end, she rebelled huh?”

He said coldly. He had no reason to be angry for Memento's sake. But, wasn't this like being told “You're no longer needed so just sleep forever,” by her own parents?

Because of Haruha's “success”, Memento was labeled as a “failure” and lost her own worth. Memento herself wasn't at fault, but due to the sudden change in situation, she went from being a “major breakthrough” to just “mere data”.

What an unreasonable story. But that unreasonable feeling now landed on this hospital room. It was because, Niiro's mouth, when he talked about Memento, was.... smiling, happily.

“Yes. Even though twisted, she still has a personality. That's why she showed resistance towards the measures we took to seal her will — it would have be

interesting if that was not the case.

By establishing herself as an error, it seems Memento arrived to the conclusion, 『I'm an error so I must make mistakes』. And then the error Memento chose to make was to bring chaos to the world of 『CtG』”

“If so why did she become a Player Killer?”

“The reason is simple. It is just her most efficient method to overthrow 『CtG』.

Just like what Kasugai-kun had experienced, Memento's attack also impacted the players' self in the real world. That is an ability acquired from the evolution of the seed known as Memento. By giving a suggestion through gaze and pheromones, she can give a strong stimulation to her opponents-an ability to generate a fake signal to the opponent's brain. On Kasugai-kun case, the small stimulation from having his avatar's throat stabbed was processed as pain pain when the signal entered the brain. And what stopped his heart from functioning was the result of the amplified image of 『death』 coming during game over. Since it's a signal that was not originally present within the game, Ramiel Block system didn't react to it.

We call that ability as ^{Sim - Stimulator} Pseudo Senses Poison, or 『Eyes of Svengali^[30]』.”

“.....So my body mistook the small shock from being hurt in game as something that 『would kill me』.”

“It made you think that “I'll die”. You can say it's like an absolute placebo effect.

Well then— what will happen if she continues to do hunt players with that power I wonder?”

Certainly, it was an easy to guess result.

“People like me will continue to be taken to the hospital. And then 『CtG』 will be closed sooner or later.”

“Precisely. A month ago, right when we confirmed that Haruha-san had finally acquired emotion, Memento disappeared from our eyes with some kind of method. After that elusive disappearance, presumably, she wanders around randomly killing players. Fortunately there are no serious cases like Kasugai-kun

so far, but honestly speaking, imagine Ekphrasis fell under constant watch from the police.”

“.....So the recent fainting incidents were the work of Memento?”

“Besides one case due to gas poisoning, most of them are. Currently we managed to reassure the people above in order to prevent the name of 『CtG』 to be revealed to the public . However, it won't last long. Of course, we're putting effort on capturing and isolating Memento. However Memento, who simply does not know what exhaustion is, continues to move around and because she is not logged in or anything, we cannot do an immediate search on her.

“.....Will 『CtG』 be closed?”

If they let Memento run rampant uncontrolled, this incident will be revealed sooner or later, and game closure will be inevitable. No matter how large the content it has, prioritizing safety over a mere game is a common sense that even a heavy user or the son of the developer Yuu knows well.

Niiru nodded but then raised one finger.

“There is only one way to prevent that. In order to reliably stop Memento, we just have to kill her in 『CtG』. When that happens, Memento who can't log-out will have nowhere to go and will be tied-up, making it easier to us to isolate her. That's why...

We must defeat Memento. With Haruha's help”

Silence.

Those dozen seconds of silence. Was something that was brought by anger that inhibits rational thinking. And then, the thing that broke the silence was also anger.

“Don't say such nonsense!”

Miharu's strong words were so loud that it was clear that she had forgotten that they're in a hospital.

“Kasugai-kun nearly died you know! And you're telling us to send Haruha..... that small child to fight against such an opponent!?”

Niiru was unfazed. Miharu's desperate actions were easily repelled back by his

reply,

“I’m sure Kasugai-kun had already realized it but Memento is strong. It is because her thoughts are fully optimized in the world of 『CtG』. To ^{Player} Human, operating an avatar is like talking in a foreign language whilst Memento is a fluent native speaker. There is a world of difference.”

In fact, even Yuu, who was a veteran in 『CtG』 controls, was easily killed by Memento without even able to react at all. Memento’s speed and accuracy were far superior to that of a human being.

“However, if it’s Haruha-san— if it’s Haruha-san, whose mind operates the same way as her, she should be able to compete against her. And among those who we can mobilize currently, Haruha is the only Hadzar who can fight Memento.”

“Is it possible for Haruha to fight people like Memento—”

I don’t think so. Even though he told himself that, the doubt didn’t last forever as the scene of Haruha brutally murdering the train robbers played within Yuu’s mind.

“Still..... still I cannot approve that. No matter how strong Haruha is, even if 『CtG』 close down because she didn’t fight..... it’s ridiculous to expose the child to such dangers for a mere game!”

“Tha, that’s right! What happens if she dies!”

Yuu resolutely objected and Miharuru backed him up. It’s a natural action for parents who take care of their child after all. However...

“Yes. She will still die, Haruha-san I mean, if 『CtG』 is terminated”

The situation they’re in was not under the “natural” standard that applied for everyone.

“.....Eh? Wh, why, is that?”

“Haruha-san obtained a human body and became a normal child. However, just like what we had mentioned earlier, Haruha-san’s mind is synchronized to the world of 『CtG』 with higher syntax purity than the real world. If she continues to process foreign information from the real world, errors will

continue to pile up, and then she will die within, which we estimate, a week's time."

They couldn't react at all against the dire facts Niiro spoke of in an indifferent tone.

"In order to prevent that, Haruha-san must periodically go inside 『CtG』. By having her spend time in a clear world, it will give her more ease in processing data, and she will be able to adjust her body to match with all the errors she accumulates through her time in the real world. A dialysis of mind should I say."

This time Yuu was the one who got furious.

"To hell with that! You people should just take responsibility and maintain her through 『CtG』's computer right!? No matter how huge the cost will be!"

"We would like to do that if possible, but it's not. The scale of the virtual world that we must maintain in order to do maintenance on Haruha-san requires over ten million users to be connected. Even though we have the country backing, it's something impossible for us to do. Thus our modus operandi had to be covert."

"? What are you saying? Isn't it easier to do it with less people connected..."

Then he remembered as he said that— what did Fuyufu say?

『It's not the problem of capability of processing power. It's the nature of the problem itself』

『Even if it can create the same entrances and exits as a human, it won't able to create the same maze inside. The "Heart" is that maze. If you want to create the same thing..... there's no other choice but to give those computers flesh and blood as well』

And thus the performance of the computer that operates 『CtG』 improves as the number of connected ^{Player} Human increases.

—Could it be...

"Is it..... a human computer?"

He suddenly blurted. Miharu blinked with a blank look on her face, and Niiro— smiled, letting out a rather refreshing grin.

“Correct. The identity of the ~~Client type~~ computer that constructed the world of 『CtG』 is a performance operation system that uses the connection between the flesh of human and its network to work.

"The consciousness and the body of people, down to the last cell and gene, are made into a database calculation device. With that device, we arranged the responses we got from it and managed to observe the same world that was observed by humans from the moment of their birth.— that's right, even the human mind as well. In other words we managed to observe the memories of humanity.

"A dream of a person might be full of absurdity, but if we mix and match the dreams of several of tens of thousands of people then the absurdity will be filtered out, which means the more the number of the user the more closer to absolute reality we get.

Eight thousand people are needed just for a simple start-up and we have that amount ready on our end. To put it in other words, that is as much as we can manage.”

So that's why they say it could only be operated by the game maker. It made it clear as to why they kept secret of the computer's specification. It would be hard to think that there would be a million people who would want to put their own body inside a machine.

—A human computer that manages an online game in order to achieve its goal-to maintain its performance level.

And if it cannot maintain its performance, Haruha will die.

“How could this be happening.....”

Not only was his daughter an online game addict, but she also shared the same fate as it.

The following one hour was a Q&A time that needed not to be described in detail. Yuu and Miharu, who understood the reason, was still reluctant to expose Haruha to danger and raised issues, and Niiro, kept on reassuring them that there is no other way to solve this problem other than to have Haruha fight Memento. It endlessly repeated itself.

But then, the person who settled the barren dispute was none other than the person in question herself—Kasugai Haruha.

Haruha, who came inside the room along with Hajime spoke with a severe expression for the first time.

“Haruha will do it. Haruha will defeat that Memento,”

She must’ve heard the situation from Hajime. Naturally, Yuu and Haruha desperately tried to stop her. She might be the strongest existence in 『CtG』, but the Haruha they both know is an innocent, spoiled, lonely girl—a small child who they knew since she was born.

“Haruha has decided already.”

But, Haruha at this time was intently firm. Even though she would occasionally pout, she would always listen to Yuu and Miharu, but for the very first time Haruha went against them.

The dissimilar girl equilibrates from collection of observations of human computer. The round eyes of hers are filled with the color of iron, and Kasugai Haruha sentenced in a cold voice.

“Daddy, mommy. Don’t follow Haruha. It will just be a burden. If that happens, Haruha will go back home”

‘Go back home’ was the line Rasupu-chan’s mother often said when scolding her resourcefulness father—it’s not even laughable. On the contrary, Yuu and Miharu became haunted with the color of despair in their eyes.

Which house.....did she meant?

Everything went fast by the time they made their decision.

Everyone quickly went back to Kasugai house — although it was a bit forceful, Yuu was allowed to be discharged — and Haruha laid her small body in the capsule shaped Ramiel.

At first Yuu thought it was like some kind of medical equipment, but after hearing the machine’s soft humming echo through the room at night, it looked like a black coffin. Somehow the two soft vinyl dolls Haruha brought with her looked creepily like a grave goods.

“Around ten minutes ago Memento was seen by surveillance camera at Gunmans’ Glaive frontier town. She’s possibly looking for a prey tonight.”

“The game internal state can be viewed on this display”

In front of the provided monitor were Hajime’s still-depressed face with Yuu and Miharu’s gloomy faces all lined up. On a different spot there was the ever calm Niiru pushing the Ramiel switch and as if singing along the start-up sound, the sunglass man speaks.

“Well then, shall we watch over her. In this world where your daughter shall train to be the strongest gunman.”



—An acrid smell of burned dust.

Looking at the vast view, the gentle sky and harsh wilderness will greet you.

What can be heard across the winds are the whistling of adventurers heading off to the unexplored.

In this land everything is decided through guns and courage.

One person shall grasp glory in their hand while the other shall sleep with their gun on their tomb.

In here, the gun smoke drift enough to choke on your own tongue. The amount of gun cartridges rolling on the ground equals to the number of victories and corpses.

This is the dream horizon of the gunmen.

Its name is: Gunman’s Glaive—

Cheech^[31] fulfilled his dream.

Ten years or more had passed since he diligently worked as a salaryman in a medium-sized company immediately after his college graduation. Ever since then, it had become his dream to quit his job and work in a stylish bar on the streets.

However due to his weak will, his savings won't increase, and by the time he was about to succumb to resignation from being the company slave, he met 『CtG』. And by the end of his miser play for few months, he finally set his feet on a tavern at one of the towns in Gunman's Glaive.

It's near the prime location of the transition point church. The store came with Clerk NPCs included in the set. And now, he is finally able to accomplish his many year dream to become the moody owner and bartender of a bar.

But his hopes quickly burnt up on the first day of the reopening.

The store is currently wrapped in a full blast dangerous atmosphere.

Excluding one of the seven customers, all of them were men; they have scary faces and don't even try to hide their gun belt. It wouldn't be a rare sight in Gunman's Glaive if it was just that, it's all because these people are wearing worrisome faces despite being on a gathering place.

“Mr. Bartender, are you aware of the recent player killer case?”

Within such sight, the only female guest smiled and talked to him. It was a girl around her mid-teens. She had a pretty face but for some reason, she wore a black dress which left a strong impression on others.

“Yeah, that thing flowing on the news line right? More than thirteen people were taken down by it or something.”

Cheech replied with a smile. He's not a lolicon^[32], but he liked this more than dealing with the stiff and rough male customers.

“From what someone said, it happened in taverns like this one. There were six customers. And everyone got killed in an instant.”

The girl took a sip of the hot milk she ordered, and continued after licking up the remaining white residue on her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“The culprit enters the store and wanders around, and finally she says,

『Who is human?』

The NPC clerk unhesitatingly answered 『me』. But, it's not an answer a person will give when being asked so suddenly. All ^{Players} Humans tilted their necks and said 『Eh? What does she mean?』.

And then, in the next moment, everyone's necks were torn apart. All six of them, almost simultaneously.

—The black culprit is a gunman using a large ^{Revolver} revolver with a terrifyingly fast shooting speed, and the culprit seems to wander around killing just player characters.”

Cheech swallowed his breath involuntarily. He thought the story itself was just an exaggeration but the girl's tone of voice that spoke of this massacre drama was too indifferent... it was as if she was telling the story truly down to the core.

“.....And what happened to the employees— the bartender?”

“Aah, the NPC bartender was safe. Saying stuff about receiving chips or something.”

“Is, is that so..... so the bartender didn't die,”

“Why—”

As if taking the place of Cheech, who went back to polishing glasses, one of the rough customers opened his mouth. The girl went “Yes?” and turned her body to face him. The man imperceptibly stood right behind the girl.

“Just how did you know about the state of the scene where everyone got killed? An NPC shouldn't have the ability to speak that much.”

In that instant, Cheech went “Ah!”, and remembered that this was a game world. Where the dead can speak.

“Oi oi, you. Isn't it obvious that the rumors are coming from the revived killed players.”

“No, that's impossible. It was three days ago that the six of them got killed in the tavern. Those six people are all members of our guild and ever since then they got sick and went to hospital, they haven't logged in ever since.

There shouldn't be anyone who has heard about the incident from the victims.”

The man let out a voice containing anger against the girl who still had a floating smile on her face.

“After that, we got the testimony saying there was a black robed girl who came out of the tavern on the time estimated to be when the incident took place— it exactly matches your features”

“Wha, wait a second! Isn’t it way too unreasonable to label her like that!? There’s no way this kid is the player killer—”

Cheech leaned on the counter in a hurry. The six men already took out their handguns and rifles and aimed at the girl. The girl shrugged and raised both of her hands.

“That’s right, I’m the culprit”

It surely doesn’t sound like a gag.

The speechless Cheech was left behind, and the girl slowly rose from her chair while keeping both of her hands raised.

“So, what about it?”

Her voice was way beyond having any sense of guilt. The black girl gave a clear smile along with provocation and ridiculing words. Her burning golden eyes seemed to be laughing.

The first man who called her over pressed his handgun on the girl’s forehead and then threw out what most have likely been his last question, as if daubing her with his heart.

“Why do you kill other players? Is it to show off your power, or maybe you’re doing it as a prank?”

“No way, it’s not for such stupid reasons.”

“Then what?”

He exerts more force on his finger that pulls the trigger. The moment the girl says her answer, a hole will show up on her breast— but even though it’s just a game, the image shown in his mind made Cheech’s body tremble.

But, if this happened in the real world, he would’ve shown a more ungraceful reaction.

“That’s because—”

That moment— two small handguns ^{Dillinger [33]} pops out from the girl's sleeves. She's using the skill 《Sleeve Weapon》, a skill that allows the user to pull out small types of weapons into their hand without being bound by the laws of physics.

Every single man who aimed at the girl was not caught off guard, however. In fact, all of them instantly opened fire.

But, the girl's formidable shooting rapid-fire was beyond what she showed to be. The Dillinger's small bullets that were shot hit three of the men which disturbed all of their fire as they tried to avoid the remaining bullets by rolling on the floor.

There was also a man who went stiff when he got shot on his shoulder. As he was about to stand up, she delivered one last shot on his face. She then restrained the remaining while using that man, who muffled a scream from severe pain, as a shield.

The girl then discards her Dillinger's that were out of ammo and drew her main weapon.

It was a jet-black revolver equipped with a flat square barrel, something he's never seen in real world. On the side of this disproportionately large barrel that is being held by a girl was the engraving of a snake warping around a land tortoise. The silver coating on the gun shines an intimidating light.

『I. E. Genbu』. It bears the name of its maker ^{Imagine Ekphrasis} I. E., a revolver with special power in 『CtG』.

What happened after that was simple. Very simple in fact.

A continuous firing, aimed at the necks of the six in a single line. The roar-like overloading muzzle flashes and the thick iron plate increased the heat of the air within the tavern.

Red gunfire and red gunfire. By the time it all flakes off and disappears...

Six bodies of headless mannequins were lying around in front of the tavern.

In just mere moments, the bittersweet smell of liquor changed to the pungent smell of gunpowder; Cheech's tavern had turned into a bloody garden. All NPC

clerks' knees where soaked in blood as their legs trembled.

“Errrm..... why am I killing other players was it?”

And the girl who started the tragedy dutifully answered the question.

“Those who expose their throats and bark— it’s just a simple providence to hunt such animals to death. Do you understand? Dear meat head.”

That smile of hers was truly graceful, and that’s exactly why it was so terrifyingly dreadful.

It was five minutes after the girl massacred all of her pursuers when she finished drinking her leftover hot milk from earlier. Meanwhile, Cheech is killing his breath while hiding behind the counter.

“Well then..... shall I go”

The girl’s footsteps moved away. Only after hearing the creaking sounds of the swing door did Cheech finally raise up his hips from the floor. His sigh of relief loosens his mouth.

“Tha, that’s right..... the bartender didn’t die——”

Was what he wanted to say, but couldn’t. It was because his head that was now above the counter was currently pressed against a muzzle. Without even a need to look up, he heard a cheerful voice.

“Last time, the bartender was a NPC after all”

You’re a ^{Player} Human so I’ll kill you. That what she meant.

The sound of the hammer clicking into place stained through his head. This is a game after all so it’s not scary, he tells himself... but this is the first time I experienced what it’s like to have my brain blown..... Like hell I can stay calm!

The moment Cheech was about to shout, the situation took a big turn.

The swing door was opened wildly and a small figure appeared.

The small figure lowered the guitar case on her left hand and pulled out a truncated horizontal two-barreled shotgun with her right.

Along with the sound of gunshots, the body that was holding down Cheech trembled and collapsed. Her back was bruised by the sudden shot.

The newly-arrived guest drops her guitar case to the ground, and shot the girl's head with the handgun she pulled out with her now empty left hand.

Two bullets were casually shot as if just sprinkling insecticide. *SPLASH* the bloody letters Head Shot Killed!! were splattered as if sweeping the floor.

He was surprised at the fact that the demon-like girl got defeated so easily, but knowing that the girl who did that appears to be less than ten years old surprised him more. Why is she not a Travel ^{Player Carrier} PC—the idea to ask that simple question was washed away by the overwhelmingly strange situation. Simply, he stared at the child in awe.

The hazel cloak shines as if it banked fire into the dimly lit store. Her face which is cute and lovely matches her young age, but her expression was simply too cold.

“E, erm, young miss.....?”

He timidly called. The girl looked down the ^{mannequin} corpse she made in apathy and talked. She spoke with a lisp voice.

“Where is Memento?”

“Memento.....?”

“A girl wearing black clothes. She must have been here.”

“Didn't you beat her down just now?”

“This is not her”

When he looked at it— it certainly is not. He couldn't see it when his head was pressed against the gun, but what the mannequin is wearing isn't a black robe; it is a waiter uniform Cheech is familiar with.

“No way..... isn't she Marian?”

She's the clerk NPC he took over when he brought the store. Why would Marian turn a gun on her employer..... no, more than that, the voice from earlier was certainly the black girl's..... it was Memento.

And then.

“Pleasant to meet you, ^{Pretty princess} Star princess. I thought it was about time for you to

show up.”

The next voice he heard was from ^{Memento} that girl. But, it was extremely strange.

“However, isn’t it just somewhat too violent to shoot me all of the sudden like that, even though we finally meet.”

The one who spoke was an NPC waiter, John. A youth set with a cheerful personality. And from his mouth, he let out the exact same voice as Memento.

“John, why!?”

While pointing the store’s ‘self-defense use’ rifle which he possessed towards the guitar case girl, she spoke, either to Cheech or the girl.

“Meme’s 『Svengali』 can only give a fake sensation against humans. However if it’s against NPCs who don’t have genuine self-awareness, I can manipulate their every limb as if they were my own”

Cheech couldn’t get what she meant but it appears the little girl understood it. And unsurprisingly, she stares at John with a lit ice fire^[34] on her eyes.

“Memento..... where are you now?”

“Waiting right outside, Haruha”

“Is that so”

The girl called Haruha then struck John. Heart, neck, and forehead— the three key points in 『CtG』 were shot through in an instant, and lastly she blasted him with a shotgun. The mannequin face popped out like pine cones bounced to the wall and fell to the floor as if it was dancing.

After shooting all the bullets she had, the girl unsparingly dumped her exhausted guns and walked out with her out-of-place guitar case. She then squatted and opened the lid of it which revealed all the tightly packed guns and magazines inside it.

Cheech was dumbfounded watching the girl chambering the first bullet into a retrieved handgun, but when Haruha was about to go outside, he hurriedly tried to stop her.

“W-wait young miss! Just how many NPCs do you think are in this town? No

matter how strong you are, if you're doing it alone you might.....”

He thought she would ignore him, but the girl glanced back at Cheech and showed an innocent smile.

“Thank you. But Haruha will be fine, Mister.

Haruha will surely kill all who dared to annoy daddy or mommy”

Meanwhile Memento is waiting all alone in front of the tavern waiting for her to show up.

Different to the real world, the Gunman's Glaive's current time is noon. The sun above their heads was shining violently on the midday.

The place where the tavern is standing is what is known as the profane “Church Road” which is the aorta of this town; usually it's flooded with passersby and horses. However, in this moment, there's only Memento seen on the street. There seems to be a lot of people watching from inside the buildings, but no one dared to come out. They were afraid of becoming one of the ^{mannequins} corpses lying on the street.

A strong wind blows through the frozen air of fear.

The tavern swing door quietly opened and the opponent Memento was waiting for appeared.

Soft hair, an atmosphere of a transient world wrapped within her childishness, and a gaze that sank in the shadows. She dropped the guitar case that hung on her shoulder and a dull sound echoed as it hit the ground.

The girl then pulled out two strange guns with both of her hands.

It has a realistically unimaginable symbol of a phoenix engraved on its red metallic slide filled in with gold that shines fiery. It's a game-original automatic pistol similar to Memento's Genbu, 『I. E. Suzaku』. It's a crimson gun of destruction with tremendous firing capability.

The grip changes depending on the player's hand size, which appear to be really unbalanced for a girl who is not even ten years old yet, and the silhouette on both of her hand looks...

“Like a monkey wearing mantle.”

“Haruha is not a monkey.”

She dutifully answered and stopped her step. The distance they had is about ten meters. From both girls’ vision, they were able to see each other’s eye moisture.

As if to respond to Haruha who stopped her leg, dozens of people showed up from inside the store facing the street and alleyway. Every one of them was equipped with guns or axes. It’s not necessarily out of place but the appearance of old lady in an apron holding a rifle gives a unique intimidation.

It’s all of the NPCs under Memento’s control. They were surrounding the young girl in a large number.

However, showing no interest to the surroundings, the girls begin their conversation.

They talked about things that cannot be conveyed through their eyes. At least up to that point the two, the girls’ dialogue—

“I know it, Haruha”

“Why did you hurt daddy?”

“Haruha who was raised by humans and became human”

“Even though daddy did nothing wrong.”

“Haruha who is a real human, unlike Meme”

“Mommy was scared.”

“But, Meme couldn’t understand the difference.”

“..... you made them cry.....”

“What’s the difference between Meme and Haruha?”

“..... Haruha will.....!”

“If, there are no differences.”

“What you did, ten times more.”

“Haruha must not be here as well.”

“Haruha will make you, pay.”

““That . is . why””



“ “ Die ” ”

The wind blows and the red mantle wildly flutters.

Simultaneously, all the NPCs controlled by Memento pulled their triggers, and along with the sound of nonsensical explosions, Haruha's mantle was torn like firecrackers.

But at that moment, the Haruha's figure had already part ways with the mantle and began running on the ground. And while rushing through the legs of the lined up NPCs, she shot their heads from low angle. Blood spouted from the bullets that penetrated through their jaws up to their brains, and as if taking an uppercut, their heads were thrown up into the air. However, unlike boxers, they just kneeled as if praying and never moved again.

One after another the blood splash soared to the high sky and descended, red flowers bloomed on the ground just like fireworks that turnaround the heaven and earth.

Head Shot Killed !! Head Shot Killed !!

Head Shot Killed !!

Head Shot Killed !! Head Shot Killed !!

(Memento! The one who hurt daddy! —Kill!)

Her sharpened malice took form; her instinct drew a slaughter straight line through calculation on her sight. That was the rail spread by the world for Haruha. It's something that only those who were naturally born with understanding of virtual world providence and law can use, maneuver of revelation.

That small body was swept away along with the wind killing the entire group.

It blew like a violent storm.

It took away the false human nature from the ^{NPC} dolls, and built a row of hollow mannequins in an instant.

While slipping through the enemies' legs, she blew up their gastrocnemius [calves?] in a close distance, she pulled the rifle of the enemy in front with her elbow and shot it to the enemy on the side, she then kicked the wall and grabbed on the enemy's neck with her knee and break his upper body with a cartwheel.

After finally getting rid of NPC bodies that covered Memento from her line of shot, she pulled Suzaku's trigger with great accuracy. However, the attack was stopped by a big man with an axe wherein the bullet hit his knee instead.

—But she won't stop. Haruha discarded the gun without hesitation and pulled out knives from both of her sleeves.

Using the knee of NPC as stepping stone, she cut through deeply into his neck. Without stopping she climbed up his body and jump in an instant, and after cutting her way out of the enemies, she arrived at the spot where she left her guitar case.

That moment, her eyes met with Memento's on the other side of the herd of NPCs. On the other side where the burnt smell of heat distorted the air, she let out a joyful smile. Haruha just returned the gaze and unlocked the case.

And, from inside she pulled out the third, and fourth Suzaku slide and combined it together, with great dexterity as she loaded the first bullet...

The killing resumed.



“This is... amazing”

Niiro's heavy sigh broke the long silence.

In the Kasugai household living room, the four watch Haruha's fight earnestly through the screen without even wiping their sweat. However from what Yuu observed, it seems each one of them fell silent for different reasons.

Just like what he said before, Niiro was only watching to measure the potential of the experimental body his people created.

Sitting next to Yuu, Miharu was worried about Haruha more than anything as she was surprised seeing her fight. She kept her voice from leaking by covering

her mouth with her hands.

Meanwhile, Hajime's reaction was hard to distinguish; even though her lips loose up close to a smile, her face was clearly pale. Could it be that her position as a researcher and her personal feelings are conflicting with each other?

And finally, Yuu was clenching his teeth due to his own pitifulness.

He cannot stand in the stage where Haruha's life is at stake. It also does not change the fact that this is the fight that determines the fate of this game, the fate of his mother memento. While his chest was being filled by the bashful thought, the pain Memento engraved into his body and the words Haruha left became a chain that took away strength from him.

(Even though I must be the one who protect Haruha.....)

『If that happens, Haruha will go back to home』

In the end, she said that. He disappointed the person he must protect. But, he also said the same thing to his mother who often leaves him for her work. And eventually he stopped informing her about class observation day and sports day because she won't come anyway. He also won't even try to consult to his mother when he was troubled about something.

He didn't know that being given up by someone was this painful.

This might be the consequential punishment for his helplessness. Because he had given up, he lost his mother, and now he might lose Haruha, too. As the feeling of nausea reaches his neck, Hajime spoke.

"This is as if..... she isn't Haruha-chan"

She then cleared her throat, probably because her voice was huskier than she thought. It sounded painful for Yuu as he felt the disconnection between the "Haruha" that fights ferociously on the screen and the "Haruha" that he knew. A child who doesn't need them, a child from "other side".....

But, the one who denied those words—the one who strongly denied those words was, Miharu.

"No. She is unmistakably, our Haruha. Just look at the screen closely"

""?"

Unsure what she meant, Yuu and Hajime watched over the screen Miharuru was pointing at— there displayed the close-up figure of Haruha shooting a gun. They both squinted their eyes to look more closely. Haruha was there. The upper half of her face was covered in shadow. The only thing they can see was the wild muzzle flashes, but.....

“Ah!!”

He then noticed, his eyes opened wide, and then shouted along with Hajime.

““Aa, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa——!””

Everything became obvious when he noticed that—

““The muzzle flashes became cat’s paws———!?””

“S-Since when did she customized that.....”

As Hajime wiped the sweat under her chin Miharuru nodded deeply and smiled.

“She may be young but she’s a girl after all. Being fashionable is a given”

Is it.....? He thought.

“Haha.....”

He couldn’t help but to laugh noticing the cushion Haruha placed on top of the sofa also has animal paw pattern. It’s all connected— she is Haruha. No matter how powerful or fierce she became, she is unmistakably the same Haruha who wet Yuu’s shirt with drool this morning.

And then.

That Haruha, was shot and blown off in the other side of the screen.



Three remaining NPC’s are left. And finally Memento takes action.

Shooosh with a smooth motion akin to that of a ghost, she came close behind Haruha in an instant. Against the giant NPC in front of her, Haruha pierces through its stomach and lung with a knife, and finished it with a shoutei* [strike with the heel of the palm?]. Swiftly, she pulled out Suzaku and shoved it back to where Memento is.

Memento had already pulled out her big black gun. Both of their guns' paths didn't cross with each other. Memento's gun aimed Haruha's forehead, and Haruha's gun aimed Memento's heart—in a close distance, both of them ready to kill their target.

It's what was called a Mexican standoff... but,

The girls pulled the trigger without hesitation. The violent roar broke the silent space and the image of two girls distorted within the sound and heat. The two fluttered along with the stimulations of gunshots, and the bullets that were shot hit Haruha's cheek and Memento's flank, they managed to scrape off a piece of their opponent's skin and spilled their blood. However, the two didn't stop.

Guns exchanged fire.

The murderer's recklessness took away the threat of ^{Prometheus} gunpowder.

The two clashed each other's fist to prevent their opponent from getting the chance to aim. The battle of the girls who were innate of the ground of the virtual world was so elaborate and without even a moment of hesitation. All of the actions they made were simply done to defeat their opponent.

Perfectly and infallible – the two inevitably equally matched. It's believed that it will stay that way— but.

The situation will eventually lean to Haruha's side.

(Mustn't lose..... mustn't lose.....! If Haruha loses—!)

Haruha's strong will and purpose further accelerates her top speed. She gradually pry open her line of fire, for each time she succeeded she optimized the algorithm of victory.

And she finally reached it. She finally had her opponent's small key point under her line of fire. On the deadly trajectory that pierces through Memento's heart, her muzzle stopped!

At that instant, Haruha's body was blown.

“Ah.....?”

Her shoulder was pierced by a bullet shot from the side. That small body that very light compared to that of an adult, soared like a leaf, and fell on the ground

like mud.

What she was able to perceive while helplessly rolling on the ground were that dozens of NPC had appeared in addition to the two left. It seemed while Haruha was focusing on her fight with Memento the second wave had shown up.

Haruha who fell dramatically was quickly surrounded, and she is looked down by Memento with a thin smile.

“Just a half-step more. Very unfortunate isn’t it, Haruha?”

While she held down her shoulder, she glared up. With a Hadzar restraint strength she was able to withstand the pain, but she can’t raise her arm in this condition.

“.....For sure, Haruha will beat you up. Haruha won’t let you end 『This place CtG』”

“Well indeed, if Haruha will not defeat Meme, Haruha won’t able to sustain her life after all”

Against Memento’s point, Haruha answered,

“.....It doesn’t matter what will happen to Haruha”

She abandoned it.

That child was always full of curiosity and was interested in everything. However, against ^{name} word that provides that small body of hers a place, she easily let out a voice warped in contempt.

Memento narrowed her eyes. It was the word that she, a person who earnestly seeking for self-definition up to now, couldn’t believe. Is it that? Is it the difference between a ^{herself} failure and a ^{Haruha} success? If that is the case, then the next question Memento will deliver shall lead her to the answer she seeks.

“If it’s true— then for what reason, is Haruha fighting for?”



『Because this was the place where mommy can sing as she likes』

In response to Haruha’s words.

Miharu was stunned; the hands that were holding her scream up till now had

dropped from her mouth.

“Haruha..... just for that reason—”

『And also, this is the place where daddy will bid farewell with his mommy!』

In response to Haruha’s next words.

Yuu recalled the old story he told to Haruha as Clamp this (today basically) noon.

『The reason I’m playing this game is, to have a talk with my mother』

『Daddy’s mommy?』

『That’s right, she’s your grandmother. She had already departed to heaven though』

『She died.....?』

『Yeah, that’s why it’s impossible to meet her anymore. I can’t talk to her anymore..... though, I hardly talked to her when she was still alive however.

Even way before I obtained my sense of discretion she had always been busy with her work, and during the day I would stay in Fuyufu’s..... the girl we met this noon, house. I was neglected I suppose. And also, the presents she gave me on my birthday or on Christmas were always games she made at work. She said that it were ones from before they were open for sale to the public, in other words beta versions. They were full of defects and at times I got sick of them.』

『Did she gave a huggy wuggy.....?』

『Aaaah..... very rarely, I guess』

『That surely is lonely』

『That’s right..... and because of that, I didn’t really like my mother. Even on the very rare days she got a break she wouldn’t say anything to me..... and while things stayed like that, she died』

『To die, is that right..... scary stuff』

『Yeah, it’s scary. And what’s scarier is at the day of her funeral, a person who claimed to be my mother’s friend told me. “Your mother makes game for your sake”.

It was because I don't have a father, and because mother has to go to work she can only rarely take me out to play. But it's her wish to show the world to me, so that's why she made it with all her might, a wide world where even a^{me} child can safely have fun adventuring in various places.I'm sure that, in her eyes, her unsociable son is nothing but a weak and small kid like Haruha.

And the last game she made is this "Cradle to the Glaive".』

『So this is..... This place, is the world grandma made.....』

『Stupid isn't it..... Me and my mother.

She worked hard for my sake and created this amazing world but all I wanted was actually just a simple world where I can be with my mother. In the end she didn't get anything. But, also, I can't even tell that to her. Because of that she remained unknowing to my feeling and I also stayed unknowing that all her hard work was for my sake. Both of us sure are bad at talking, we sure are a bad combination. But, exactly why, the only thing I can do is to fully accept all her hard work. The world my mother left behind, a world she prepare for me — I have to accept every single bit of it. Because that is the only funeral I can give to her』

『Funeral.....? What is that? 』

『That means..... To give farewell wholeheartedly to his/her very important person 』

It's natural you can say, Memento couldn't completely understand the reason Haruha gave.

『.....I don't really got it, but in other word's Haruha is fighting for the sake of Clamp and Mifa, the two who raised Haruha?』

『That is right. The only thing Haruha has is just daddy and mommy』

『They are just an existence to tune Haruha up to shape. They're just humans amongst the large pile. So the thing that Haruha, who is a very rare existence, is betting her life to protect is just their freedom? Even to bet your own life? What the heck is with that? Stop speaking nonsense』

Memento was clearly confused. Even so she kept smiling.

Haruha is different. Her expressionless face quickly crumbled as she vigorously shouted.

『It's not nonsense! Daddy and mommy would give Haruha a hug when Haruha asks to, and they also sleep with Haruha when Haruha asks for it, and if Haruha did something bad they would get mad for Haruha's sake! Even though Haruha is not their real child they will give a lot — a lot of love and huggy!』

Ignoring Memento who was confused as to how to respond, Haruha lowered her head from fatigue.

『And such a kind daddy and mommy are fighting..... Even though they were always smiling in the game. It must be because Haruha went there (to real world) and troubled them.....』

What's shown in Haruha's eyes wasn't sadness but the color of determination.

『That's why..... That's why Haruha is a bad child, a fake daughter like Haruha doesn't matter at all. What matters is to protect daddy and mommy's important place, nothing more』

Niuro then spoke to Yuu and Miharuru who pulled out their Ramiel.

“Are you two sure? She said she will go back home though”

Miharuru ignored him. And Yuu answered with a sharp canine voice.

“I don't care less”

In fact, Kasugai Yuu was furious.

Towards Memento, Niuro, Haruha— and moreover, himself.



“—Regardless, it's Haruha's loss. And then, the tool that couldn't fix an error is an error itself..... what a mess”

Memento loosely lifted her gun and aimed between Haruha's eyebrows.

Haruha stared straight into the gun muzzle without hesitation. Her arm still couldn't move. If she tries to stand all the NPCs surrounding her will open fire. If she is killed by Pseudo Senses Poison, Haruha's body in the real world might

suffer some serious nerve abnormalities. She might die.

But no problem. Haruha's winning condition is just to neutralize Memento. Other than that, nothing else is important.

With this close of a distance, if she's able to throw a knife a moment right before the shot, and redirect the impact done to her skull by the hit of her knife, it will pierce through Memento's throat and break her cervical spine.

(I'll die, and kill her)

And it will be all over. She will save the world of 『CtG』 that Yuu and Miharu need, and they won't be troubled because of Haruha. A rational result. She will kill all fake humans who harassed her parents. Kill everyone, along with herself.

That is, the only cold equation (method) that shown to Haruha by this beautiful world"

Memento pulled the trigger and Haruha took out her last blade out of her sleeve.

And then.

The bell rang.

The pencil-like bell from the small church's bell tower rang loudly right behind Memento

""Eh.....""

Strangely, Memento and Haruha stopped their movement. At exactly the same time, their gazes were drawn to the door of the church. The mirror house connected to other worlds.

And what emerged from that door were, the two people imagined by the artificial girls.

Clamp wearing unsuitable heavy armor, and Mifa dragging a large rectangular guitar case with his help.

Haruha's family shows up, they stepped firmly on the vector known as determination.

While still aiming her gun at Haruha, Memento exaggeratedly shrugged her

shoulder.

“Thank you for accompanying me that time, Onii-san. Didn’t think I would see you again”

“Well, I agree”

Clamp and Mifa stopped dozens of steps away from the large number of NPCs, Memento and Haruha. The thrown guitar case made a sound as it hit the ground.

“What business do you have?”

As she asked, Memento commands the NPCs and directed their gun towards Clamp and Mifa. Clamp answered regardless.

“We came to pick up our Haruha”

When her eyes met Clamp’s, Haruha’s pupils shook as if frightened.

“And while we are at it, Memento, I will kill you”

“Can you? It’s 3 against 22”

“You counted wrong.”

Mifa said frankly, and Memento went “What?” voicing her puzzlement. Against it, Mifa voiced a strong voice that Haruha never heard before. She was angry, seeing Haruha got hurt.

“It’s a mistake thinking that there are just three of us.

—Lie down, Haruha!”

As soon as she shouted, Mifa and Clamp threw themselves towards the ground.

And then, the lid of the guitar case left on the ground was blown away. It was blown away high into the sky.

Since it stayed in the sky so comfortably— by mistake Memento looked up. And all the NPCs that were connected through her thoughts follows. Conversely, Haruha obediently followed Mifa’s instruction. In that single moment of less than a second, they’ve achieved their goal.

From inside the guitar case a stuffed doll-like thing uproariously emerged. That stuffed doll has an umbrella, arms, a scrabbling-like face, and is holding a multi-barrel machine gun

—As all of you’ve already guessed. It is the brave figure of sire Payakino holding a Gatling gun like the one in a western massacre scene.

“—LET’S PLAY”

The mushroom heartlessly declared and began the slaughter.

Usually it’s used with a turret, but Payakino lightly swung the large gun, and the NPCs lives were reaped like cutting weeds by the bullet shot through the rotating barrels. The wildly splattered blood became a fog that dyed the air with its red color.

“Oi, what the heck is this Kinokino^[35]..... something that big exists?”

“T-This is total mess.....”

All of a sudden the onlookers who were watching from afar started whispering to each other.

“Ufufufu..... that is the wilderness kidnapper Paya The Kid”

“You sure are late with the news!?”

Those who explained with the know-it-all face was the familiar elderly couple. But enough about that.

What was left after it ran out of bullets was the crispy reverberation in the air and the mass of shattered bodies of mannequins.

And standing right in the middle of that nightmarish burning hell is the figure of Memento standing perfectly unharmed. However, she couldn’t help but be separated from Haruha.

That’s why, what Haruha saw after the gunfire is the figure of Clamp squatting right by her side. She didn’t see Mifa’s face. Because, the moment she raised her body, she got embraced by her.

“Daddy, mommy..... why.....?”

“Sorry that we’re late”

Looking for traces of wounds on her, Clamp stroked Haruha's cheek. It tickles. Haruha twisted and averted her eyes.

"Haruha said don't come right!what if, you die again?"

"Because I'm too weak, I made you force yourself. But, it's alright now"

"Even though, Haruha said Haruha will go back home....."

"You will. Your home is... our house right"

".....hic....."

Her father's words and her mother's warmth loosened her stiffened body.

"That's why"

Then Clamp made a strict face and stared into Haruha's eyes. After that, he hit Haruha's head with his firm fist. Since they're inside the game Haruha didn't feel any pain. But, pressure of his "seriousness" spread through her head.

"Don't ever say 『not their real child』 again. If you say that, at that moment"

That scolding mouth then crumbles into a cry.

"I'll cut our parent-child ties."

Haruha's determination that did not collapse even in front of her death... was unceremoniously shattered.



"She is crying....."

Hajime muttered in surprise as she peered into the cradle-type Ramiel Haruha is in.

And immediately, she found the reason.

Hadzars who were born in virtual world will grow without doing the normal action of human baby— eating, sleeping, and also crying. It because consuming nutrient and sleeping is needless in this virtual world to sustain a life. And they gain wisdom without need to rely on others.

And Haruha who seemingly spoiled child is not an exception. That's why when

an “enemy” like Memento showed up she didn’t rely on Yuu or Miharuru but tried to protect them instead.

And the tears shed by Haruha who don’t know what cry were happy tears.

And against that strange, bizarre, blessing moment, Hajime was trembling.



“Well then”

Clamp slowly rise up and glared at Memento.

“It’s already night in ^{Other side} Real World. Let’s end this quickly”

Memento excessively opens her arm.

“Do you think you can really with your family—including that mushroom?”

“What a nonsense I’m hearing. Figure it out ^{Toy head} Cyber girl, I alone, am enough to deal with you”

That moment, Memento’s face that was showing a confident smile earlier turned expressionless. Whether that expression was anger, aghast, or maybe something else, no one knows.

The girl opens the revolver cylinder and inserts a bullet through the displayed submenu screen.

“A duel huh. Interesting isn’t it, gunslinger”

Those who ^{Gunslinger} are armed with guns. The reason why Memento calls him that was presumably because of the four disposable guns ironically resting on Clamp’s both side and thigh holsters. Weapons stored in a sheath or holster has merit to be equipped without taking it out from the item box. But, replacing magazine when running out of bullet is clearly way more economic, including the shotgun on his waist, there are no player who would carry five guns all at once.

“Mifa, raise my status with your song skill. Payakino, protect both of them”

“Daddy, Haruha will take care of her—”

Haruha tried to stand up in a hurry but Mifa won’t let go of her. Clamp stroked Haruha’s head and walked around Memento.

Mifa then gently admonish Haruha who restlessly squirm.

“Haruha. For now let’s just trust Clamp..... our Kasugai Yuu-kun”

She hugged Haruha’s head, and looked at him together. Clamp’s back that walked in a circle with Memento as the center.

“That person looks a little bit cooler in game right?”

What stopped Haruha weren’t Mifa’s words or her strength, but maybe the faint heat mixed in that voice.

Mifa’s clear singing voice rides the wind through the land of wilderness town, and soars into the distant sky.

—That name is 『The Perfect Gamer』. Lightly gallant, lyrics devoted with trust and prayer to their beloved ones.

As his entire physical ability rose by the singing voice, Clamp took out a shortened double-barreled shotgun from his waist, and asked Memento.

“Memento. Do you know why I’m called Scarabaeus?”

“? No. What about it?”

“I see— then it’s my win”

In the moment when he floated an irritating smile on his face, Memento aimed her gun with out of context behavior and opened fire. The sound of gunshots that was like the roar of a god beast violently shook the atrophied town of tragedy and disappeared into the other side.

Memento saw it. The world of 『CtG』 is the world of determinism for Hardzar. She is able to accurately predict the definite future of next few seconds. That’s why she was able to see the future where the bullet will blow off Clamp’s neck and add a new mannequin to the pile.

But.

The bullet didn’t hit Clamp. More than that, Memento lost sight of Clamp. She lost it along with the future she saw.

Hence, the fact that she was able to avoid the direct hit shot from the side was due to her pure reflex and nothing more. However, she wasn’t able to

completely avoid the shotgun from the blind spot, and she received a scratch on her shoulder. Drops of blood are falling. —Graze Hit!

“I said don’t get carried away!”

Clamp’s voice was heard from slightly different place from the direction of the shotgun. He is slowly walking around Memento.

Memento was confused— she couldn’t understand. What happened just now was, something beyond this world's Law of Physics, something impossible to happen.

Clamp had moved 6 meter away in an instant. Memento herself has unfeasible speed, but this is way beyond that. A skill or item that allows teleportation to such distance does not exist in 『CtG』. Gunman’s Glaive in particular, the item that allows a similar feat is just 『Rut of Journey』 which allows warping to the church.

“O, oi..... isn’t he that Clamp of Scarabaeus? You know, the one on ranking list”

“The guy who has an abnormal score in game completion with short play time, the one who was suspected to be using cheats? But if that is the case isn’t his level too low, and I’ve never heard that cheat being doable in 『CtG』”

The onlookers start whispering to each other, but they’re off the mark. Currently there is no phenomenon of data modification or such. That’s the conclusion. And that is exactly why she can’t understand.

“What did..... you do?”

That truth must’ve humiliated her, however Memento was smiling. In mist of confusion she was smiling. Meanwhile Clamp nonchalantly answers.

“Scarabaeus. Because it’s too absurd, I don’t use it in PVP. But, it’s a different story against the opponent who dared to hurt Haruha. Without hesitation or mercy, I’ll crush you with all I got”

“.....Hmmm”

This time Memento attacked using her legs instead of her guns. She unsheathed the knife that she had on her hip, and instantly appeared right in

front of Clamp's chest. The moment her blade launch onto his heart, the menu screen in front of Clamp disappeared —

And the figure of Clamp disappeared as well.

(Again—!?)

This time she quickly rolled on the ground and escaped from the incoming shot. As expected, a shotgun blast then passed by the place where Memento once was.

By the time she stood up and directed her gun, Clamp who was five, six meters away from her discarded his shotgun and pulled out a gun from the holster on his side. It's a very common, orthodox type of automatic pistol in Gunman's Glaive.

Memento shot regardless. Bullets from Clamp's gun don't have much power in it. Even if they hit each other the possibility of Memento receiving fatal wound is zero.

The bullet Memento shot was again inexplicably dodged by him. But unlike before, this time Clamp only teleported several centimeters away. He staggered a bit, receiving the shock from Genbu large-caliber bullets.

However, what struck Memento was a further absurdity.

The bullet shot by Clamp's gun lost its target as well. Memento's swiftness and reflex to dodge that bullet in such short distant was indeed way surpassed Clamp's ability.

But, that bullet that should've been from a standard handgun grazed Memento's left shoulder— and loudly blast the wall of the bar behind her. Brush aside the scream of the bartender from inside the bar, that bullet strength is beyond normal. Memento's shoulder that was grazed had been broken and is now loosely hanging down.

This power is like, the armor piercing ammunition shot with large-caliber rifles to fight large monsters. Obviously, it's not the strength that would come from a mere ordinary handgun.

Thus, that ordinary gun is most likely not a normal gun at all. That gun flew

away from Clamp's hand and began floating in the air.

When an automatic pistol has finished firing, it would discharge its cartridge, but that mechanism had stopped midway. Specifically, its overly large cartridge is stuck by the slide cover and is unable to complete its function to the end, morbid sound endlessly ring and it stays in the air.

Abandoning his now unusable gun in the air, Clamp pulled out the same type gun from his holster. It's nothing special, his ridiculous multiple-equipment is simply for the convenient use of that one-time-only gun.

"This is..... That's right! This is—"

And after all that, Memento had finally understood. The reason why Memento couldn't understand Clamp's absurd behavior, the handgun that stays in the air ignoring the Laws of Physics, and then the meaning of the nickname of Scarabaeus—

"This is... a bug!!"



Bug. It's the word used to refer to ^{bug}insect wriggling in obscurity and causes problem or defect within a program.

".....so that's why"

Hajime Hidari pulled up the 『CtG』 game control part of the source code with the terminal in her hand, and she finally found out the cause of the strange phenomenon caused by Clamp.

Niirō then delivered a puzzled gaze and she straightforwardly explained the mechanism in question.

"First of all, about Clamp's teleportation-like action....."

The teleportation item, 『Rut of Journey』 has a rewind function to return the player to their original coordinates in case of error in order to avoid the problem that occurs in the middle of teleportation, and to do that it records the variable of the area where the player was in before the teleportation was executed. This variable is obtained during the final confirmation of the item usage, and will be

deleted when cancelled, but if you open a menu that has a higher response priority than the item and closes it in a particular order and timing, the variable deletion sub-method will not get overwritten and the variable information alone will remain.

And then, after walking a little he uses the 『Rut of Journey』, proceeds to the menu, to the usage final confirmation screen, and pulled out the logout screen while pressing cancel. As a result, along with the error from the teleportation access, an error code will be reported to the system— and he will be teleported back to his original position”

“Too long..... in short, what happened?

“A simple coordinate bug! By acquiring the coordinate information on the spot he once stood on, he will be able to instantly teleport there at any time..... In other word, a trick^[36]!”

“A trick! To think that such a thing also exists in this modern day. Then, the rifle bullet from that handgun too?”

“A bug too. There are two ways to load bullets into the magazine, doing it manually or through the menu screen in a batch. For the latter, the compatibility check between the gun and bullet is not done through the virtual world physical calculation. It’s instead handled by 『CtG』 game system. The set property determination is a combination of two digit alphabet and six digit numbers — like 『GB000001』 or 『RB030103』 for example. It’s done with reference to these ID.

However an armor-piercing bullet data ID was scraped and re-implemented later in the middle of production. Apparently during that input, what originally was to be 『RB020013』 ended up as 『 B020013』, in an incorrect format.

And the program that determines whether or not the bullet is usable, treated the blank as a wild card and processed it to be usable, and thus, the powerful handgun bullet with ID 『GB020013』 is able to be loaded onto any possible gun.

Although, as you can see, as a result of defying the law of physics, the gun ended up like that after one shot”

“.....Thus Scarabaeus, huh”

Niirō laughed quietly.

“What a fateful parent and child”

Scarab Dung Beetle^[37] is the sacred symbol of the sun god in ancient Egypt, and the figure of it has been engraved on amulets and trinkets as well.

Scarab, amulet of insect. A boy who protects with a ^{bug} insect.

Clamp of Scarabaeus.

That is the nickname given by the veteran players on a whim knowing about Clamp’s playstyle of using bugs, and strangely Yuu himself came to like it and did not remove the tag. The subtly silly tone it has felt fitting to him.

Playing games his mother made when he was young had become a part of his life, and for Yuu who had played various prototype versions of game before its release, bugs are as natural as air to him.

At first he simply felt amazed and irritated by it, but as he encountered more of it, he figured it out, why such things happen, and eventually he was able to somehow predict various internal mishandlings of it. Those were, his mother’s simple mistakes, he thought. In there, his mother who was often absent from home, was present.

After that he would enter his mother’s absent room, find a memo with a program processing flow plan written on it, and open the programming guide filled with sticky notes— He was able to objectively perceive his mother’s game ideas and bad habits, and began to find gaps within it and read it through like a kind of paranoid behavior.

It might just be a distorted affection, that by finding defects in his mother’s work he tries to seek revenge against her.

In doing so, like an anteater that attacks the nest of ants, he was able to find large number of bugs inside his mother’s game. He would report bugs that affect the game progress like in-game currency or big bugs that changes the parameter by an abnormal number and have it fixed by the management boards. However, he won’t report bugs that were more complicated or extremely difficult to reproduce, and make it his own thing.

A secret treasure he won't pass to anyone. The jewelry of Scarab. His mother's fragment.

What's left in his mother's game, what's left in Yuu's relationship with his mother.

The remaining ^{bug} wound is now giving Yuu the power to protect his new family.



"It sure was powerful"

Upon understanding Clamp's identity, Memento had finally escaped from the confusion.

"But it means nothing if it doesn't hit, and Meme won't let that happen"

Even though it's an irregular bug gun, as long she knows the type of its bullet, avoiding it won't be a problem. As for his instant teleportation, she still doesn't get its principle but she understands its rule. Clamp was most likely planning to end the fight by disrupting Memento with his instant teleportation then shooting her with his bug gun. But, there is nothing more tragic than to miss in such a situation.

By the time he missed with his first shot with his bug gun, Clamp's defeat had already been determined.

"It's the end—"

She directed her gun towards Clamp and pulled the trigger without hesitation. And just like before, Clamp's figure disappeared. But, after he teleports, Clamp can hardly move. Considering all patterns up till now, that teleportation bug would only teleport him to somewhere near the area before he teleports.

If it only has such a short range, she can kill him by the moment he reappears— that was what Memento thought. But.

0.3 seconds had passed after Clamp's disappearance.

His face... appeared right in front of Memento.

"...!?"

She became confused once more. Memento had accurately memorized all of it. There is no way Clamp could be right in front of her. How can he teleport here? Did she predict the teleportation condition wrongly?

In reality it was another bug that “Made the player invisible for an instance when he/she opened the 『Remove all equipment』 menu and closes it at the exact moment when choosing the option“. It doesn’t do any good by itself, and it was just a trivial problem that would most likely be ignored even if it got reported.

However, it was a daunting task to identify for Memento who had been shown coordinate bug teleportation over and over. And it is exactly because Memento can assess the situation in a split second that she got confused.

Psychological bug combo. Memento had been artfully trapped in it.

But.

Even so Memento’s victory won’t waver. Even if Clamp fires the bug gun in such a close state, she would fire even faster than him. Their speed is simply far too different from each other.

But, however.

The next moment, Genbu had disappeared from Memento’s hand.

『Snatch !』

At the synthetic sound of 《Snatch》 succession, Clamp raised his battle voice in the closed space, and the jet-black gun moved to his hand.

The moment Clamp had disappeared he threw away his gun and became empty handed— with that he fulfilled the condition to use the《Snatch》 skill.

It was because he did not underestimate Memento’s competence, he understood that even if he manage to get an opening in that close range it would just end as a suicide attack. How does he understand that? That was because Haruha had showed Memento’s potential to the limit in the middle of their fight.

That’s why, all of his actions up till now, was just foreshadowing for this single moment to take away her gun from a close proximity.

(I will win! Win and talk to Haruha! Not apologizing or scolding, but— 『Thank

you for thinking about us!!)

Even so.

Even so, Memento did not doubt her own victory.

The next moment after she recognized that her gun had been stolen, she would unsheathe the ^{Derringer} small gun from her sleeve and shoot Clamp in the face, before he would be able to do anything with the stolen gun— Memento can do that.

But, however.

Even so.

The girls, the girls of Clamp's family, was already convinced. Of who win this duel.

『Stealing the enemy's weapon while empty handed, and then, in perfect timing, activate a semi-auto attack; it's a style that relies heavily on preliminary actions. It's a distinct specification of 『CtG』 I say』

The two did not forget the words Kasugai Yuu once said.

Memento couldn't predict that it wasn't a legit move, but a bug.

Clamp had already directed his gun towards Memento at a distance of less than a meter. At nearly the same time Memento's derringer already had Clamp in its line of fire. Mifa and Haruha, shouted with all their might.

““Got it-----!!””

The triple roar of gunshots overwhelmed all sound and wind in the city

It was from the revolver-only high-speed continuous shooting skill, 《Fanning》. Its action to repeatedly fire bullets while pressing the trigger was said to be similar to fanning a fan.

—『I. E. Genbu』 the most powerful handgun in Gunman's Glaive. The remaining three shots bombarded Memento's stomach in an instant. The overwhelming firing sound and ignition flame was more of an explosion than a gunshot.

Then, as the roar's aftermath was sucked into the vast dry land and faded

away, all that remained was silence. The conclusion of the duel produced a solemn air.

The next sound heard after that was the short sound of Clamp's gun hitting the ground. Only after he heard that sound did he finally recognize his victory. His noisy heartbeat had finally calmed down, and the wind that was absent during the gunshot had finally returned as the victor was decided.

Following the flow of the wind, Clamp looked down upon the girl.

".....Guns sure are great..... a tool for humans to kill another human. Unlike Meme who couldn't even find her own living purpose....."

The ^{flower} black girl bloom that blooms from the other side of ^{Hope} Haruha.

Memento's stomach was shot and her upper and lower body had broken off.

Her kneeling lower body collapsed and had already turned into a mannequin, and her upper body that had lost its other part has both of her hand open, resembling the number ten^[38].

That figure of her was like a Origami "Yakko-san" without its Hakama^[39]. A handpicked, doll.

".....In that regard, Meme is an error after all..... because Meme is an error, Meme can't even accomplish bad things....."

The blood flowing out of the huge wound on her stomach formed the words "Near Contact Shot!" on the ground. Clamp felt exceedingly bitter and was about to step on the blood letters to break it, but as he thought that would mean to stain Haruha and Memento who were the incarnation of 『CtG』, he stopped.

"You won, Haruha. Your belief stays true till the end. Meme will obediently sleep"

"Memento, you..... was it your plan from the very beginning to lose against Haruha, who is a 『Success』, and become a 『Failure』?"

She was born to be a human but couldn't be one in the end— for Memento who had lost the purpose of her own existence; her only remaining desire was to get a clear definition of what she is. Even if that answer is garbage.

Clamp approached Memento, got on his knees and shook his head.

“But that is wrong. The one who defeated you was me. Using all the cheats at my disposal”

Memento’s throat trembled. She tried to raise her head and laugh, but couldn’t.

“If that’s the case, then the one who will stand in the line of fire will be Onii-san instead of Haruha. But no. Haruha made Onii-san protect her..... that is the power of a human. Haruha, who became human, is different from Meme, who couldn’t become a human.....”

“.....”

“But now, Meme is happy..... thank you, thank you..... Onii-san”

“I didn’t do anything praiseworthy I think”

“But Meme, thanks to Onii-san, Meme lost, and Meme has been established as 『A trash who can’t win against old humanity』 you know? It is way worse than losing to Haruha. Lower. Narrower..... aah, like spit spat by a drunkard on a garbage dump nearby a toilet, it felt really pleasant like having my head trampled thoroughly on the ground.....

Aaaah, good..... it sticks..... the definition sticks..... no more, no more need to look down, no one will need Meme..... a..... Meme..... Is relieved.....”

Memento’s words felt really hollow, and it melts in ecstasy like the haze of dawn. Clamp didn’t force himself to understand her, and replied so frankly.

“..... I have no idea what you’re saying”

“Of course, that is natural..... Meme is an error after all”

Shortly after, her body turned into a ^{mannequin} corpse, and somehow appears to be really pleased.



“Good job. We have successfully captured Memento and deactivated her. Let’s go back before the commotion starts to spread”

Hajime reported through the red lens-shaped parts on the Ramiel that Haruha was lying on and let out a huge sigh. On the monitor displaying Gunman's Glaive, there were the Kasugai Household residents running away from the cheering onlookers.

Haruha was smiling and happily running away. It was a face she didn't show when she was fighting Memento. Feeling relief, her cheeks loosened up.

"And who would have thought that Kasugai-kun defeated Memento and not Haruha. Also, what a great ^{Blade Runner} doll hunting wasn't it"

Even though they were both smiling, Niiro Mansei's smile was somewhat horrifying.

"But still, this is problematic. It's hard to decide whether this is a result coming from Haruha's potential or an irregular result coming from Kasugai-kun's unique player qualities. Just how should we take this result and make it into data..... no"

Trouble trouble, he repeatedly mumbles, his voice was bouncing pleasantly. He must be thinking about the chaotic daily life that will happen from now on.

Hajime depressingly sighed. Her eyes naturally swung to the ^{Ramiel} black coffin Haruha was sleeping on.

This incident with Memento is only the beginning. The infinite world connected to that coffin will eventually turn into a battlefield.

The start of the selection stage of Hadzars who obtained the criterion known as Haruha.

Now that it had passed the prototype stage, from now on, the curtain to the supremacy phase choosing for the superior mankind successor will rise. Not just Yuu and others, even unrelated general player will be involved.

Hadzar. The future ^{Eve} Bride.

Even Hajime couldn't predict how will each of these girls, who were about to be awakened with bizarre powers, fight in this battle of survival. The future no one knows.

But, that is okay, she thought.

In order to skillfully and endlessly stimulate the player's adventuring heart a

game would present them with darkness, the more darkness in front of them, the more people will be tempted to step forward.

No matter how dark and deep that darkness is.

Mankind no longer has the time to stand still.

Epilogue: I'll play till the end for your sake

That night, Kodzuchi Fuyufu was feeling depressed on top of her bed.

The reason for her depression rested upon the box in front of her. The Ramiel package for 『CtG』 use was quite bland. Just recently, a new version with improved usability and new design changes had been released so the price of the old ones dropped and sold for nearly half price. But even so.

The pocket money she planned on not using till next year had all been blown away from buying that. Unless she takes a part-time job, she won't have any money to even go out.

“.....My funds are ruined because of that idiot.”

Fuyufu was not a loner so she usually doesn't talk to herself that much. Even that mumble of hers were actually directed to her white cat, Quan. The cat had lain, curled up into a ball on top of Fuyufu's knee. She was wearing her pajamas.

While stroking Quan's back, Fuyufu picked up the Ramiel package.

—She hated the device so much.

Like this one, there were plenty of game devices that Yuu's mother had made games for as their launching title. Then, each time a new release came out, Yuu would disappear from Fuyufu's sight. It's always been like that ever since they were young.

He would often complain about his always-working mother, but he would always be looking forward to the result of her work. That was the kind of boy Kasugai Yuu once were.

When she was still in the lower grade of elementary school, Fuyufu's body was very weak and she would often stay inside her room. On many occasions, Yuu would visit her and tirelessly complain about his mother. From listening to his complaints, Fuyufu would get tired and quickly rest on her bed and go to sleep.

Despite that, when his mother presented him a new game, Yuu would go crazy about it and end up not visiting her.

I'll ask my mom so Fufuyu can have the game as well, so will you play with me— like that, he had proposed to her once, but she flatly refused. She didn't really know the reasons as to why she was opposed to the idea that much, but somehow she just felt resentment to the idea.

In Fuyufu's room, there is the memento of Yuu's mother, the『Cradle to The Glaive』 terminal(entrance).

After many years of witnessing his mother complex issues, Fuyufu understood very well about Yuu's feeling for 『CtG』. That's why she planned to let him play it till he was satisfied. It would be good to let him gradually ease his sorrow, and it might actually be better to let him alone for the mean time. She had thought.

However, as a result of that, Fuyufu met a dubious girl named Kugimiya Miharuru and a strange child calling herself Haruha.

And these mysterious who-know-from-where girls appeared to be living in the Kasugai household.

That's it! Waiting won't do any good. Even if I continue to wait, Yuu won't come to this room anymore.

And that Haruha kid also said—『Mommy and daddy... you see... are 《married》 inside the game!』. And currently, the only game Yuu would be playing is nothing but 『CtG』. Whatever was happening must be related to that game.

Thus Fuyufu opened the Ramiel box akin to the myth of Pandora's box. Disaster and chaos might befall Fuyufu's world as she opened the box to seek the truth of Yuu's current situation. But.

“He was the one who invited me to play the game to begin with— I will surely make him take responsibility for this!”

And as if to voice its agreement, the cat cried “Nya~” after her.



That night.

Kugimiya Miharuru was staring at her own face in front of the washbasin mirror.

The Kasugai household was drowned in silence. For Miharuru, having silence in an unfamiliar house brought a strange sense of discomfort throughout her skin.

There was the figure of Miharuru who had just taken a bath with freshly dried hair. Her face inside the mirror. While gently stroking her cheeks with her palm, she closed her eyes. It was as if to firmly root her decision she had made in the bathtub into her body.

About her mother, her father, Haruha, and Yuu.

With Yuu and Haruha putting their life at stake, Miharuru also made a decision. No matter how precious they are, it's not like they will always be together forever. It is after all natural, she knew that but she just couldn't accept that maybe.

That is why— like that. She opened her eyes, and once again looked over herself in the mirror.

“In order to not regret this”

Miharuru walked towards Yuu's room.



That night, Kasugai Yuu was very tired.

—Long. Today sure was a long day.

Woke up, ate a simple breakfast, went shopping, met Fuyufu and made a ruckus, played the game and died once, listening to a ridiculous story about a human computer, watching Haruha's fierce fight, then battled Memento who cornered her, somehow still managing to teleport away from the onlookers, and when he return to real world he ate a cup ramen for dinner, and had a shower.

Finally, Kasugai Yuu's helplessly long day was over. The day had made his heart and brain run wild, enough for him to feel uncomfortable in the room he had lived in for nearly ten years.

“It was surely long.....”

Above his familiar bed, Yuu let out a big sigh. With the strings of tension finally cut off, his exhausted body tried to relax itself.

He had calmed down right about now, but before, right after he logged out he had vomited everything inside him due to the overwhelming tension he had experienced, moreover he strained his nerves more in order to not let Haruha notice. Even eating dinner took all the energy he had left; it certainly didn't feel like he won at all.

And Haruha, who Yuu was finally able to protect, was now sleeping right next to him. She curled up like a cat and with her twig-like fingers she grabbed hold of Yuu's shirt. When he tried to fix the sifted towel blanket, she let out a sweet "Nyu" sound.

—No matter how long today had become, if it meant he was able to see such a sleeping face then it's a cheap price to pay.

(I always wonder what this girl really is but.....)

A strange child born from inside his mother's game. People involved with the country said that it was the product of a top-secret plan "to create a new human race". In matters of killing, they're the strongest being in the virtual world.

They were shown the fact that in merely 2 days— Haruha was "something" that was completely different from him. A child, whose purpose of existence was unknown to him.

But, even by admitting that, his heart had already made its decision. In there, there was Haruha, Mihaaru and him and he felt that it wasn't bad.

This feeling might be like the one he had towards his own mother. Even though he didn't know anything about her, even if he was often irritated by her, in the end he didn't feel bad about it.

It means, he loves Haruha. He loves his mother.

He was finally able to admit such a simple thing.

That was why, after all that had happened, he had to face everything straightforwardly.

(Me, who was running away from Haruha, couldn't possibly say goodbye to mom)

While talking to himself inside his head, he was speaking to the small finger holding his shirt.

“I’m sorry Haruha..... I really am good-for-nothing. Even though I knew you from the moment you were born, I couldn’t even understand your feeling.”

“Me too.”

The voice came from the just-open door. It was Miharuru, who had left Haruha with Yuu and went to the bathroom to prepare for going to sleep. In a pajama she just bought today, she appeared to be more restless than before.

Regardless, the pajama she was wearing was a summer-use with thin fabric. With her being bare from the knee down, her leg looked really smooth and bright, she was pretty enough to make Yuu embarrassed just by looking at her.

“Haruha will surely still feel uneasy after returning back from the game, we mustn’t make the atmosphere worse than this”

Miharuru came near the bed. She appeared to be hesitating as she curled her toe. Miharuru steeled her will and climbed onto the bed.

The need to uphold the promise of “the three of them sleeping together today” she made with Haruha overwhelmed her own resistance towards the idea. Yuu straightforwardly respected her and her feelings for Haruha. But even so, it didn’t seem he would be able to get used to the feeling of having another person on the bed for a while.

After peeking at Haruha’s sleeping face, Miharuru covered herself with the towel blanket and lied down.

“Well then, I’ll turn off the light.”

After receiving a faint voice of agreement, Yuu turned off the light with the remote control. Just like last night, a beautiful river^[40] was drawn below the pale moonlight.

For a while, only the sound of Haruha’s sleeping breath and Miharuru’s restless sound of rustling clothes was heard. From what it seemed, Miharuru and Yuu were naturally unable to sleep for a while.

Around five minutes later, after they continued to feel each other breaths,

Miharu muttered.

“This morning..... Haruha said to me. Daddy is so spoiled that he always hugged her when sleeping”

She wasn't expecting any reply as she said in a small whisper. Yuu looked at Haruha's carefree sleeping face and replied with a smile.

“Regardless of what happened this morning, right now, I'm just feeling a bit worried. Will Haruha suddenly disappear?..... What will happen from now on? There will most likely be troublesome things happening while maintaining 『CtG』”

This time they had some room to deal with the unexpected things, but when it came to the complicated matters, even Kasugai Yuu, Clamp of Scarabaeus, was completely powerless as he was out of the loop. That was what scared him more than anything else.

“.....But, perhaps, that is just natural. No matter how close the person is, they will one day disappear..... that is why, we must cherish it”

Miharu called it common sense— but those words pierced through Yuu's heart. As he had given on trying to communicate and suppress the feelings he had...and one day his mother died just like that.

I don't want any more of that. While carefully making sure not to wake her up, Yuu embraced Haruha's head.

Even though they had only become a family for only two month, this hugging mole was putting her life on the line for Yuu and Miharu's sake so I have to protect her no matter what. He simply thought so.

As he smelled a strange fragrance and opened his eyes, Miharu's head was right in front of him. She also wanted to huddle with Haruha and inevitably end up closing to Yuu. Even though she should've used the same shampoo as him, he wondered why she smells so good.

Yuu was unable to properly react, and Miharu then spoke.

“.....It's okay.”

“Eh? W-what.....?”

Considering the situation he was in, his voice sounded shrill. Miharu had buried her face under Haruha's hair so he couldn't see her expression.

"Come to think of it, at first I was just half-serious in raising a child, so I won't blame you anymore concerning Haruha's name. I'll support you. Your relationship with Kudzuchi-san"

He was about to immediately deny it, but recalling back Miharu's word from before, he couldn't. No matter how close the person is, someday they will disappear.....

The face of his petite-expressionless-but-also-good-in-taking-care-of-others childhood friend vividly floated in his mind.

Settying aside whether he wanted to date her or not, Fuyufu was unmistakably a precious person for him. Their mothers were old friends, so both of them had always been together before they were 10. She was like a mix of older sister, little sister, and best friend.

And now, because of his stubbornness their relationship became distant.

He certainly had the desire to get close to her like before or maybe perhaps beyond that. Furthermore, it's something that he would never attain if he let the chance go by.

"That's why, don't worry."

Surprised by the whispers from Fuyufu in his imagination, he returned his gaze towards Miharu in reality. Miharu raised her face from Haruha's hair and looked at him. Then she spoke.

"I'll keep this a secret from Kodzuchi that we slept together."



I wonder why.

The moment he heard those words. The moment he felt the trembles in Miharū's eyes. This simple sharing of the bed for rest, somehow felt wrong. His chest tightened and his heartbeat raced faster and faster with each passing second. It was painful.

Around ten years ago, he took a nap along with Fuyufu side by side. There was also the time where he had a sleepover at her place and slept in the same futon. Thanks to these flags, she became interested in Yuu even now. The girl whom he was closest with, or rather used to be close with, and wanted to get close to. Kodzuchi Fuyufu.

Now in place where Fuyufu used to be in, was a different girl. A person whom he had a temporary marriage with. "His daughter's mother". Shy, afraid of strangers, has strong wariness towards men, but strangely nice when talked to. Kugimiya Miharū.

And the one who was sleeping between Miharū and himself was his "daughter" who was born in the game world, Haruha. While having her name derived from Fuyufu, she was the strong clamp that connected Yuu and Miharū together. Spoiled, but the cutest in the world, new family member.

Fuyufu, secret crush, Miharū, wife, Haruha, daughter of Miharū and him.

.....

.....What the heck is this?

What an overly complex situation. From now on, it seemed Hajime would hang around in the house, in the neighborhood— in the neighborhood where Fuyufu lived in, there was no mistake that strange rumors were bound to spread around.

That's right. Once again, they will have to properly explain this to Fuyufu to clear up the misunderstanding. He must tell her— "Somehow I ended up living together with my daughter who was born inside the game" — this crazy truth. He couldn't imagine what kind of reaction she would give though (too scared to think).

His distance with Miharū was also a problem. A big problem. There were also

times where he couldn't guess what was on her mind, and she was also too defenseless. Even though she said she would support his relationship with her, it's not like his compatibility with Fuyufu was that bad. And the case with Miharu's school transfer also caught his attention.

And finally Haruha. From what Hajime said, there also a plan to have her attend elementary school. Even today, where they got to be together the whole day, were filled of troubles. He couldn't even imagine just what kind of things would happen when he and others and Haruha started to go to school.

Of course, with the case of 『Cradle to The Glaive』 and the Hadzars.

.....So confusing.

A, deadly, confusing daily life was about to begin.

In such situation, while comforted with the warmth of Haruha, Kasugai Yuu recalled back certain words that were said.

It was one of the very few times he remembered what his mother said.

『Listen Yuu. Even if things don't won't work out in school, don't you blame God. In a way, God is the one who programmed the world. Of course, if there was something wrong, people will put all blame on him but— But still. There is no program without a bug after all』

— Like you're the one to talk. He said with a youthful child-like laughter.

References

1. ↑ It's based on ancient Germanic sword (<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Scramasax>)
2. ↑ Based on the name of an angel/Watcher from the book of Enoch
3. ↑ A term for TV commercial and advertisement commonly used in Japan
4. ↑ Reference to the [Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#).
5. ↑ Kinoko (茸) is Japanese for mushroom.
6. ↑ Kimono (着物) is a Japanese traditional garment.
7. ↑ Seiza (正座, literally "proper sitting") is the Japanese term for one of the traditional formal ways of sitting in Japan.
8. ↑ A type of bamboo/wooden sword, often used for sword training in Japan.
9. ↑ Based on yet another Germanic mythology (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kobold>).
10. ↑ It's combination of Yuu, the protagonist's name, and the word "bocchi" (ぼっち) which means "loner".
11. ↑ Otherwise known as Fox Udon, it's hot udon with sweetened deep-fried tofu pockets topping which known to be Japanese fox spirit favorite food, hence forth, "Fox".
12. ↑ A art of paper folding in Japan, it frankly means "to fold a paper".
13. ↑ It's written as 奴(やつこ) or Yakko, it is the name/title for servant of Samurai family from Edo period.
14. ↑ Traditional Japanese concealed weapon that was generally used for throwing, once again, you people already know this right?
15. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colt_M1900
16. ↑ A type of shotgun with a shorter gun barrel (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sawed-off_shotgun).
17. ↑ Referencing the fictional character Hercule Poirot.
18. ↑ Alternative term for black tea, a tea that doesn't include lemon, milk,

sugar, or any other additions. Just a plain tea.

19. ↑ In case of confusion, it refer to the dim light from a lamp.
20. ↑ Futon is traditional Japanese bedding, yeah, you people know it already. I'm sure.
21. ↑ The original line "あわてて履行不能の因果を含めようとする二人だったが," roughly means that the two were trying to explain that they aren't a couple. In which case, for Haruha, that can't be the case since in her understanding the two are married and gave birth to her. 履行不能の因果 basically mean "an established fact that impossible to happen" which referring to their circumstances (Yuu and Miharu aren't a couple, but give birth to Haruha). I can't find a way to translate this line properly, so I omitted part of it. - daniman1
22. ↑ The posture of a family sleeping together are believed to resemble the Kanji for river (川) where the child is in the middle.
23. ↑ Netto Benkei (ネット弁慶) is Japanese slang referring to a person who has strong personality in internet. Altered version of Uchibenkei (内弁慶).
24. ↑ A small dog of a breed with long silky hair, a pointed muzzle, and pricked ears
25. ↑ Tebiro, Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture 248-0036, Japan
26. ↑ The window here probably refers to the clear plastic you see on one side of toy boxes
27. ↑ Yuu's nickname given by Fuyufu, refer back to chapter 1.
28. ↑ Apparently it's another name for toilet
29. ↑ I guess it's a reference to this ->
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copp%C3%A9lia>
30. ↑ One who manipulates or controls another through some mesmeric or sinister influence. Just in case you don't know and too lazy to look for it.
31. ↑ Another name for weed, or to smoke weed. Named from Cheech Marin (from cheech and chong).
32. ↑ Pedophile.
33. ↑ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derringer>
34. ↑ TL Note: It literally saying "Ice fire" (氷の炎). Yes, 氷の炎, not 永の炎 (means burning cold gaze in this line). Either the author's mistake or misprint. Either way, that's what I got from the RAW I receive.

35. ↑ Read chapter 1 for more insight.
36. ↑ 裏技 (Urawaza) often translated as “secret technique”, “special move”, or “hidden skill”. Though in this case, it means “a trick/method that no one knows of” [EDIT: lit. "underhanded trick" (perhaps "cheat") or the logical operation "exception"]
37. ↑ The word for “Scarab” and “Scarabaeus” is spelled same in Japanese, although the two are essentially about the same thing.
38. ↑ Ten in Japanese is Juu (十) or like a plus sign (+).
39. ↑ A type of traditional Japanese trousers. Like the long skirt Shrine Maiden (Miko) often wear, you know what I’m talking about.
40. ↑ This thing -> 川 again. Refer back to chapter 2.